

Kingdom Hearts Birth by Sleep: The Novel

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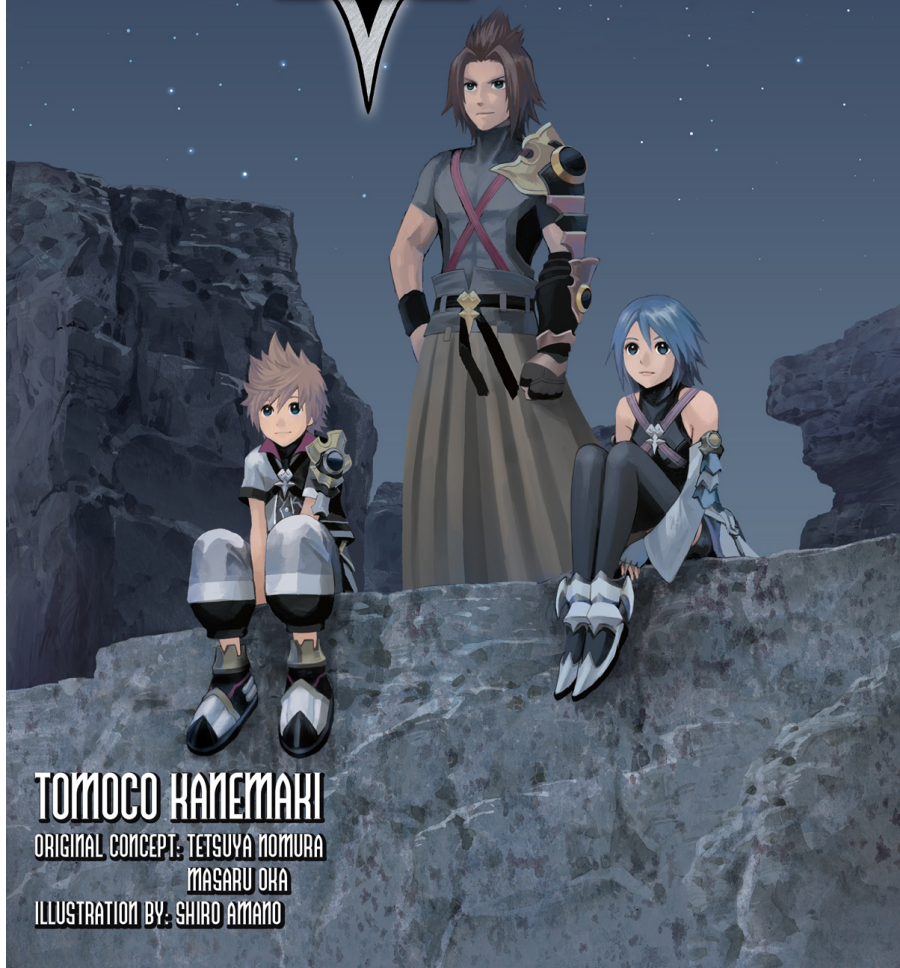
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Disney SQUARE ENIX

Kingdom Hearts *Birth by Sleep*

THE NOVEL



TOMOCO KANEMAKI

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Disney SQUARE ENIX



THE NOVEL

Main Characters



We have
our Mark
of Mastery
exams
tomorrow.
I made us
good luck
charms.

Aqua is a character with short blue hair, wearing a black and white outfit with a blue cape and white boots. She is standing with her hands on her hips.

Aqua

A girl capable of wielding both magic and a Keyblade with perfect balance. She values her friendships with Terra and Ventus above all else, and has the most serious and levelheaded personality of the three.

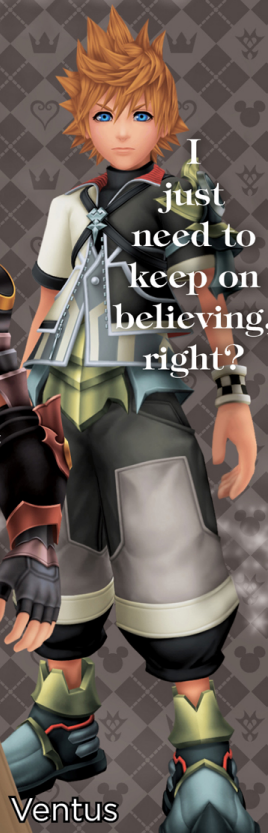


Being a
Keyblade
Master
is all I've
dreamed
about.

Terra is a character with long black hair, wearing a black and gold outfit with a red sash and a long tan skirt. He is standing with his hands on his hips.

Terra

One of the three apprentices training under Master Eraqus in the Land of Departure. Though he has a strong sense of justice and a hatred for evil, he tends to try to control the darkness in his heart through force.



I
just
need to
keep on
believing,
right?

Ventus is a character with spiky orange hair, wearing a black and white outfit with a green and yellow sash and black boots. He is standing with his hands on his hips.

Ventus

The youngest of Eraqus's apprentices. Perhaps due to his young age, he possesses a pure heart and relies upon his seniors, Terra and Aqua.

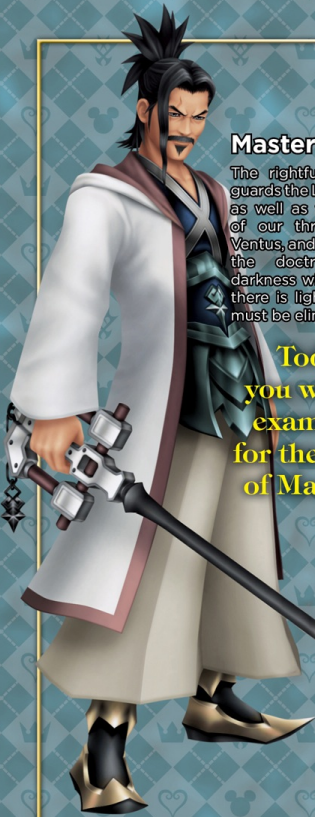


Master Eraqus

The rightful successor who guards the Land of Departure, as well as the stern teacher of our three heroes Terra, Ventus, and Aqua. He upholds the doctrine that while darkness will exist as long as there is light, it nevertheless must be eliminated.

Today
you will be
examined
for the Mark
of Mastery.

He's
leaving
you
behind.
And by
the time
you catch
up...
he'll be a
different
person.



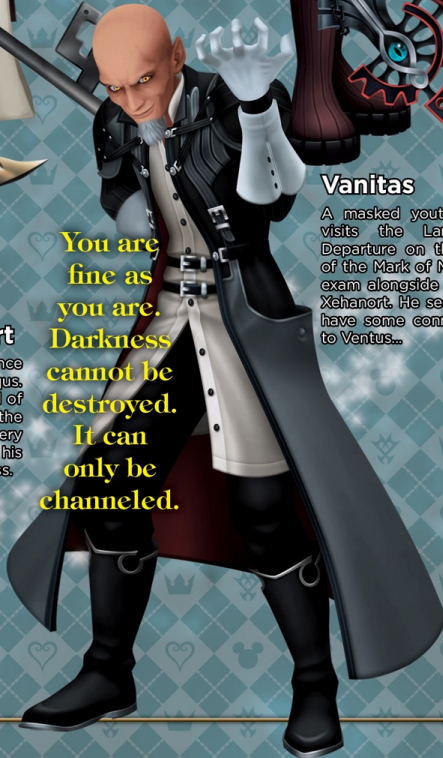
Vanitas

A masked youth who visits the Land of Departure on the day of the Mark of Mastery exam alongside Master Xehanort. He seems to have some connection to Ventus...

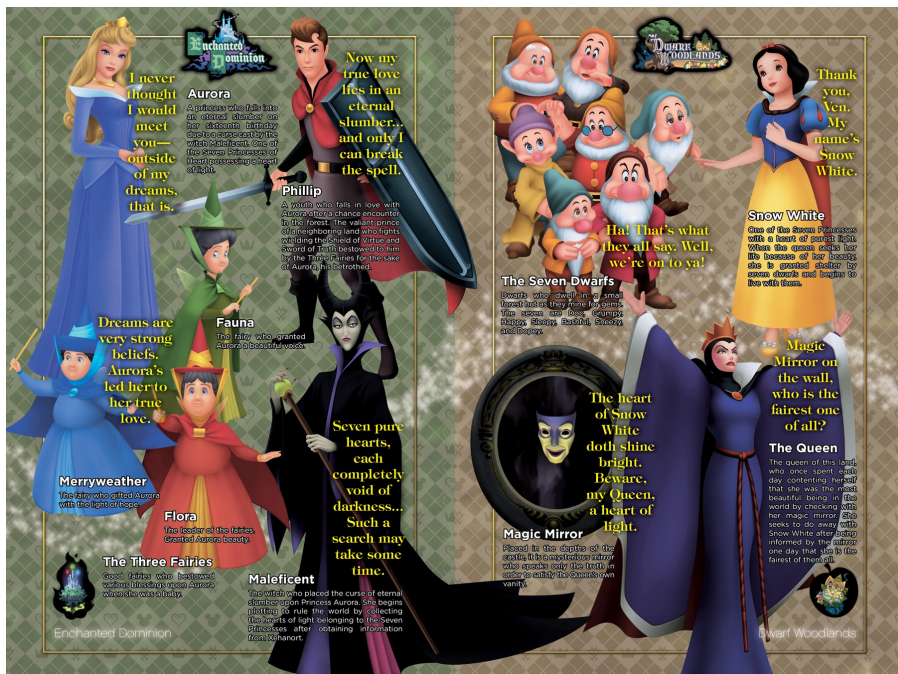
Master Xehanort

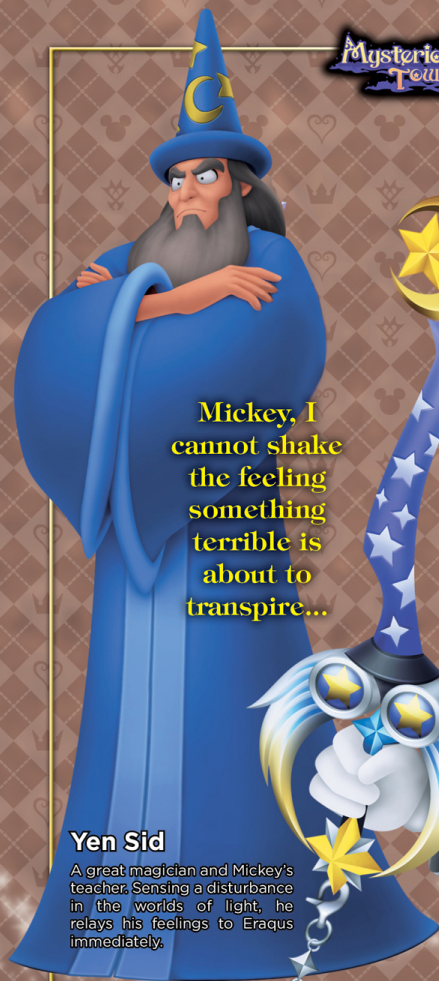
A Keyblade Master who once trained alongside Eraqus. Though he visits the Land of Departure with Vanitas on the day of the Mark of Mastery exam, what lies within his heart is impossible to guess.

You are
fine as
you are.
Darkness
cannot be
destroyed.
It can
only be
channeled.



Land of Departure





Mickey, I cannot shake the feeling something terrible is about to transpire...

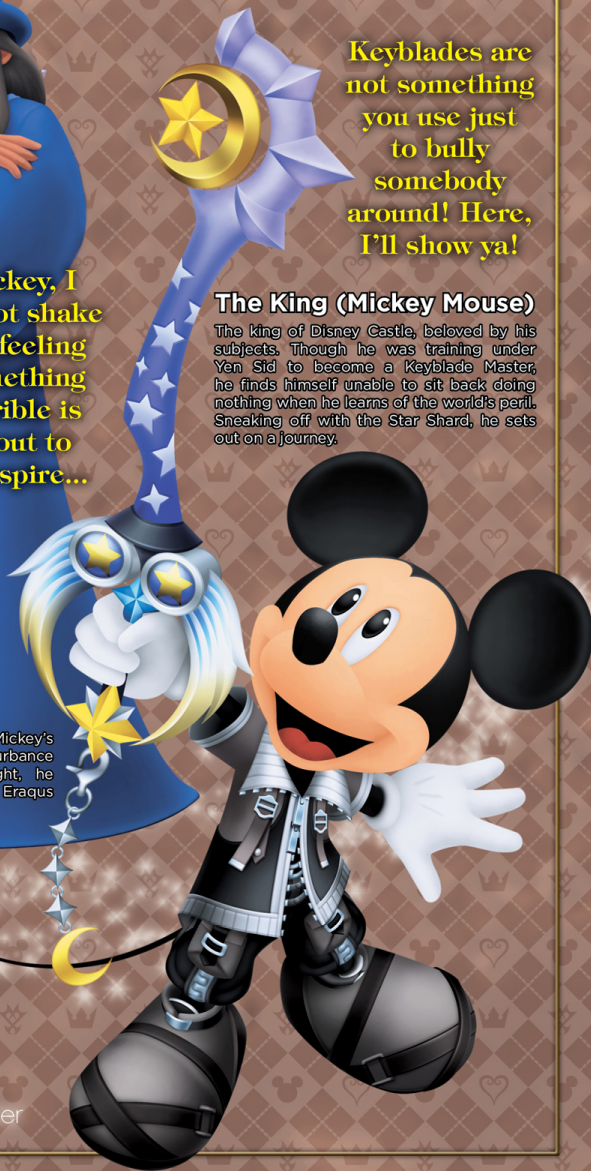
Yen Sid

A great magician and Mickey's teacher. Sensing a disturbance in the worlds of light, he relays his feelings to Eraqus immediately.

Keyblades are not something you use just to bully somebody around! Here, I'll show ya!

The King (Mickey Mouse)

The King of Disney Castle, beloved by his subjects. Though he was training under Yen Sid to become a Keyblade Master, he finds himself unable to sit back doing nothing when he learns of the world's peril. Sneaking off with the Star Shard, he sets out on a journey.



Mysterious Tower



**Wait!
Come
back!
Please
come
back!**

Cinderella

A girl with a strong heart who continues to believe in her dreams even in times of hardship. Her unwavering spirit gives hope to the hearts of not only those around her, but of all those she meets.

**I'm
going to
the royal
ball
tonight.
I guess
dreams
really
do come
true.**

Prince Charming

The handsome prince of this kingdom, who had no interest in marriage. When his concerned father holds a ball at the castle, Prince Charming falls in love with a guest named Cinderella and begins to feel a sense of destiny.

**Be careful
of Lucifer!**

Fairy Godmother

A fairy who, by saying the magic words "Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo," grants miracles to the pure of heart who don't lose sight of their dreams. She appears before Cinderella and gifts her with a dress and carriage for the ball.

**I appear to
those who
believe that
dreams
come true.**

Lucifer

A mean black cat owned by Lady Tremaine. The archenemy of Jaq and the mice.

**Look, little guy.
Take it easy.
Nothing to
worry about.**

Jaq

A friendly mouse who helps, encourages, and finds other ways to aid Cinderella as she goes through difficult times.

Castle of Dreams

Aeleus

A bodyguard protecting the castle in Radiant Garden under Ansem the Wise. A fierce warrior of few words.

The castle is presently closed.

Radiant Garden shall not fall under the likes of you.

Dilan

A soldier, skilled with a spear, who guards the gates of the castle alongside Aeleus. Unlike Aeleus, he is also adept at manipulating the hearts of others.

...What do you want, ya old coot?

Braig

One of the guards at the castle of Ansem the Wise. Has a laid-back yet sly demeanor and a habit of saying "As if." After meeting Xehanort, they end up scheming together.

A heart devoid of darkness? Stripped clean of it, at that...Very questionable.

Even

A brilliant scientist researching the heart under Ansem. While his powers of intuition are keen to the point that he is able to deduce Ventus's secret at a single glance, he also tends to think overmuch of his own capabilities.

Radiant Garden



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THE NOVEL





Radiant Garden

Lenzo

A mysterious man who is known as the "King of the World" and is the only one who can defeat the "God of War". He is the only one who can defeat the "God of War".

Let's say I have a feeling we are destined to cross paths again.

Even

A certain subject suggested to members of the resistance group, "Let's say I have a feeling we are destined to cross paths again."

We have done our best to raise the boy... since his poor parents are not here to do it.

Braig

One of the protagonists of the game, Braig is a young man who is the son of a famous scientist. He is the son of a famous scientist.

I defeat you, that makes me the real key-slinger. If you catch my drift.

After all, we're friends now. Get it memorized.

Lea

A young man who is the son of a famous scientist. He is the son of a famous scientist.

Braig

A young man who is the son of a famous scientist. He is the son of a famous scientist.

Whatever it is that binds us together isn't going to break so easily... and that's our real treasure.

Aqua

A young man who is the son of a famous scientist. He is the son of a famous scientist.

Ventus

The youngest of the three apprentices, Ventus is a young man who is the son of a famous scientist. He is the son of a famous scientist.

Yup, I don't need it if I've got Terra and Aqua. Our best memories are still ahead.

When I really need you, Ven, I know you'll be there.

Terra

Len, the leader of the group, is a young man who is the son of a famous scientist. He is the son of a famous scientist.

Main Characters



Disguised in shadows, the rogue racer reigns! I am... Captain Dark!

Gawrsh, the king must be pretty far away by now...

Goofy

Goofy's mother, Mrs. Goofy, is the queen of the kingdom. Goofy, being the son of a queen, is a prince and a princess.

Wah! Looks like we'll just have to go see Master Yen Sid!

Donald Duck

The royal nephew of Uncle Scrooge, Donald is the son of a queen. He is a prince and a princess.

What's this? Captain Jack's to the rescue!

Pete

Pete is the son of a queen. He is a prince and a princess.

Those antioyn monsters have turned up again over in Fruitball Plaza.

Horace Horsecollar

The proprietor of the kingdom, Horace is the son of a queen. He is a prince and a princess.

There's no need to be so formal. Just call me Minnie.

Minnie Mouse

The queen of the kingdom, Minnie is the daughter of a queen. She is a princess and a prince.

And we had a little trouble.

C'mon, it's not that big a deal.

Yeah, all we were tryin' to do was make our own special recipe ice cream.

Huey, Dewey & Louie

Three brothers who are the nephews of Uncle Scrooge, Huey, Dewey, and Louie are the sons of a queen. They are princes and princesses.

Hip hip hooray for Terra!

I'm votin' for Terra!

Chip & Dale

Two brothers who are the nephews of Uncle Scrooge, Chip and Dale are the sons of a queen. They are princes and princesses.

Disney Town



Captain Hook

The ill-natured and avaricious leader of the pirates. Though he's always scheming and on the hunt for treasure, he ends up in dire straits due to the interference of Peter Pan.

I have
you now,
Peter Pan!
Today's
the day I
shall be
rid of you
forever!

She's
Tinker
Bell.
We all
call her
Tink.

I bet
you can
fly, too,
if you
believe.

Tinker Bell

A charming little fairy who loves Peter Pan and can always be found flittering about him. Anyone can fly if she sprinkles a bit of her pixie dust on them.

Peter Pan

A boy who never ages and lives in Neverland. Can fly anywhere he wants in the sky. The beloved and trusted leader of the free-spirited Lost Boys.

But ya
gotta
agree to
follow us!

The Lost Boys

Children who love Peter Pan and accompany him on adventures. The skinny one in a fox costume is Slightly. The pudgy one dressed as a bear is Cubby.

Tink
saw a
shootin'
star, and
we're
gonna
go hunt
it down!



Neverland

Disney  SQUARE ENIX



THE NOVEL

Tomoco Kanemaki

Original Concept
Tetsuya Nomura
Masaru Oka

Illustrations
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NEW YORK

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KINGDOM HEARTS BIRTH BY SLEEP: THE NOVEL
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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Something Strange

Something Strange

Introduction



Introduction

THE SUN SANK FROM THE SKY INTO THE SEA, and on the shore, where the sea met the land, a young man muttered softly.

“This world is just too small...”

The silver-haired youth gazed into the evening sun.

How long had it been since then?

In the same spot, a man in a black hooded coat stood with a large bundle over his shoulder wrapped in a white cloth.

Night had fallen over the sea where that youth once stood. In the darkness, nothing else seemed to exist aside from the sound of the waves.

A white beard peeked out from underneath the black hood, suggesting the man was in his elder years, and underneath the great white sheet was a boy's face. He was neither asleep nor unconscious. He was like a doll in the man's arms, his vacant eyes open but dazed.

“There, you see? An empty world, like a prison. I imagine you'll be right at home,” said the old man.

He laid the boy against the trunk of a tree that had grown sideways on the island. He truly was no better than a doll.

The white cloth enshrouding the boy's body fluttered in the sea breeze.

His eyelids gently shut.

Still wrapped in white, the boy descended into a deep, deep sea, dark like the womb before birth.

“Hey, where am I?”

The boy replied to the small, questioning voice:

“Who are you?”

A light spread beneath him. The white cloth came loose, and the boy touched down on the ground. The voice replied:

“I’m a brand-new heart.”

The boy peered into the pitch-black emptiness and asked:

“But this is—Why are you in my heart?”

Yes, this was the inside of the boy’s heart. The light at the bottom of the inky black sea—though its gleam was failing.

“The light brought me. I saw it shining in the distance...and followed it here.”

Placing a hand on his chest, the boy replied to the newborn heart:

“Yeah, that was my light. But my heart is fractured. And now...the little I have left is slipping away.”

Everything, all of it, would be gone—until the little voice answered.

“Then you should join your heart with mine.”

The boy gave a small “Huh?” of surprise, and the fading light waxed full. As it did, the boy felt a warmth within his chest. Something making him whole.

“Now our hearts have touched. Nothing else will slip away. And one day, you’ll be strong enough to win back the part that already did.”

“Right. Thanks.”

The boy nodded. Someday, his strength would put his heart together again—he would make himself whole.

“It’s time to wake up now. All we need to do is—”

He knew what they had to do together, and said it aloud.

“Open the door.”

The light swelled. His sight was clear, and the brilliant white glow filled his world with radiance. At last, the boy’s heart was complete.

He gazed up into the darkness.

The old man in the black coat turned away from the boy against the trunk of the tree and began walking toward the black sea. Daybreak was near. He no longer had any reason to be here.

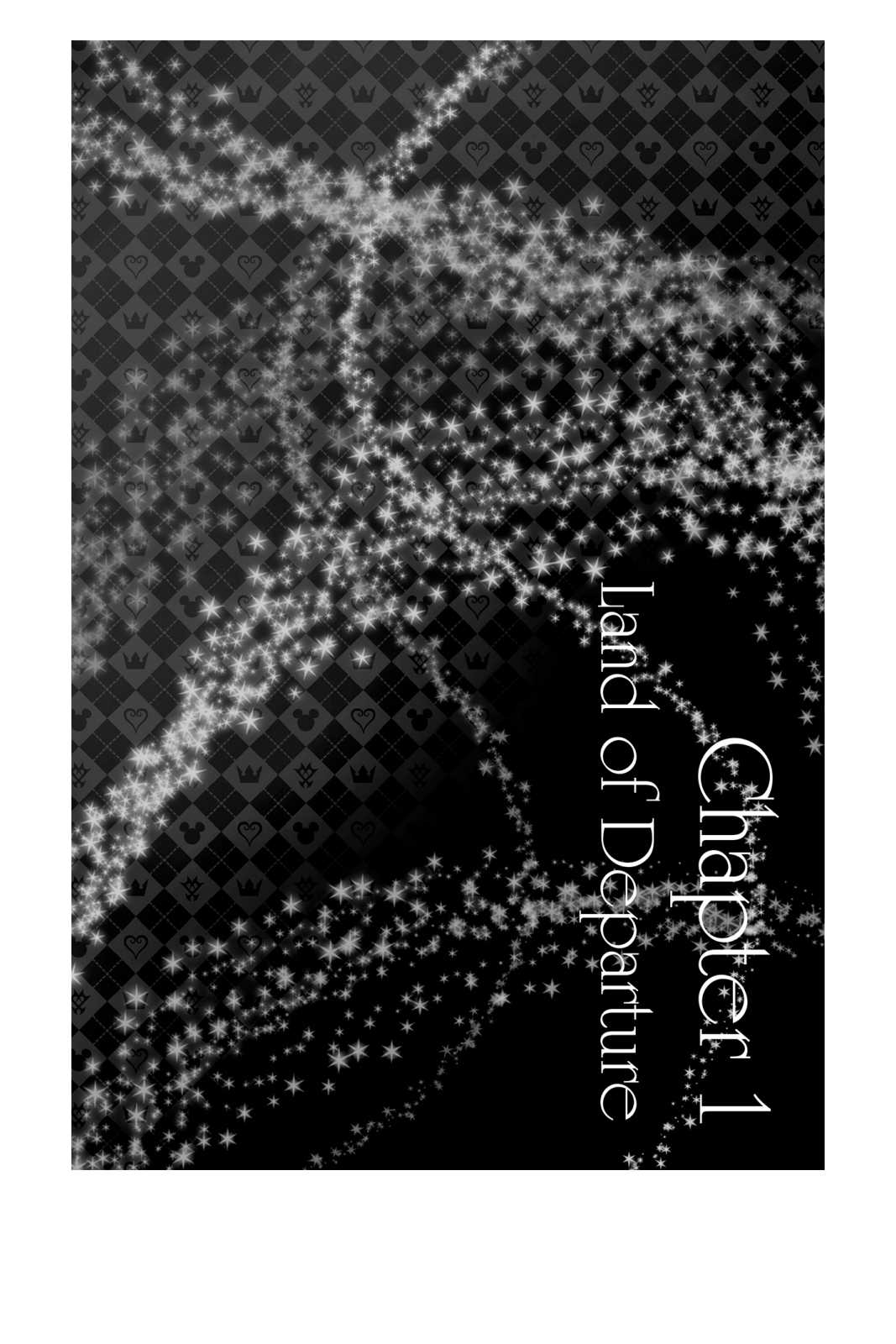
But just before he could depart, he sensed something behind him. The boy was raising his hand toward the stars overhead, and into it flashed—

“A Keyblade!” the old man exclaimed.

In the boy’s hand was unmistakably a gleaming Keyblade. A beam of light rose from its tip to the heavens.

A smile appeared on the old man’s lips. The boy’s eyes opened. In his once-vacant pupils was a spark.

And the light of the blade streaked into the sky.



Chapter 1

Land of Departure

Chapter 1

Land of Departure

THE OLD MAN STARED INTO THE SKY. The wilderness at night was devoid of anything except the blowing winds. And the thousands of stars. One of them, swelling bright and radiant, suddenly slid away and fell.

The old man already knew that stars would fall tonight. Within each one dwelled a world. When its star fell, the world would transform.

“Vanitas, are you prepared?”

The young man he called Vanitas stood next to the elder, also watching the shooting star. His jet-black hair matched the darkness of the night.

“We leave early tomorrow. Be sure to rest.”

The old man patted Vanitas on the shoulder, and the light of recognition appeared in Vanitas’s eyes.

“I can go a day or two without sleep. No problem.”

Vanitas smirked. The old man—Master Xehanort—returned the smile.

“Our tale begins now, Vanitas.”

“A tale? Is that all it is?” Vanitas put on the mask he held at his side and looked up at the sky once more.

At that, the old man convulsed with deep, throaty laughter.

Stars streaked through the sky.

One—then two, then three...

A boy stared up at the ceiling absentmindedly. His blue eyes, especially striking against his longish golden hair, blinked slowly.

He had to get to sleep soon, he knew, but he just couldn’t. Thoughts kept whirling through his head and disappearing. Tomorrow was the Mark of Mastery exam, though he wouldn’t be taking it. The examinees were his two best friends.

Master—Keyblade Master, to be precise—was the title given to warriors deemed worthy of a Keyblade.

The boy, Ventus, sat up on his bed and let out a big sigh.

The trio devoted their days to training in hopes of becoming Keyblade Masters. Ventus, or Ven as the others called him, was not upset that his two older and more experienced friends were taking the test before he could. All the same, something had him all stirred up.

He was anxious. Why was he so on edge? His friends Terra and Aqua wouldn't fail the exam, no way. But there was no denying he was worried.

Just then, something shone outside the window.

"A meteor shower!"

Ven pressed his face against the window, peering into the sky. Star after star was falling through the heavens.

He wanted to get a better look.

Ven rushed out of the room, down the stairs, and out into the yard and craned his neck at the sky. The stars were coming down between the mountains in the distance. But the view from here wasn't good enough.

Ven dashed off again. He wanted to see from even closer, and the view might be better if he was higher up. He was getting winded as he hurried up the hill to the peak. The night air was just the slightest bit chilly.

"Wow...", Ven breathed as he reached the top of the hill.

He raised both hands as if to catch them as they fell, then slowly toppled backward onto the grass. The meteor shower was all he could see, and eventually he began to feel like he was floating among them.

A canvas of stars—both fixed and falling.

"Why does this seem so familiar?"

He had experienced it somewhere, but he couldn't put his finger on where. The night sky seemed to be pulling him in...

It's...

Feeling her heart astir, Aqua closed her eyes. Her short blue hair cast a shadow on her cheeks. Training was over for the day, but she had been practicing with her Keyblade halfway up a mountain on the edge of the world. Everyone usually went through their exercises here, and she was honing her skills all alone even after sunset.

Achieving the Mark of Mastery meant undergoing a trial of the heart. And yet her heart was so unsteady. It was unbecoming of a Master.

Aqua's hands stilled, and she sat down on a large boulder and pulled a few glimmering pendants out of her pocket. The beautifully shaped items were good luck charms—three of them, in different colors. One for her, one for Terra, and one for Ven. A matching set.

She wondered when she'd first heard that legend.

The tale had even inspired her to make these amulets because of her anxiety. She couldn't help herself.

When she looked up at the sky—a shooting star fell.

"It's beautiful," she whispered, cradling her knees.

One by one, they streaked across the sky.

It was okay. She was just tense because of the exam.

Just then, Aqua sensed someone behind her and turned around. Ven had just come running up the hill to the top of the mountain. He was probably after the meteor shower.

A gentle smile appeared on her face. Aqua stood up, slid the pendants back in her pocket, and slowly followed Ven up to the peak.

As she reached the top of the incline, the starry sky unfurled before her, and below it was Ven sprawled out asleep on the grass.

Aqua peered softly at Ven's face. Had he conked out instantly? As she watched his sleeping visage, Aqua remembered when Ven first arrived. Back then, she'd been so concerned he might never wake up. And that was when Ven's eyes suddenly opened.

"Whoa!" He leaped awake with a cry.

Aqua couldn't help but laugh.

"Gimme a break, Aqua!"

"Ven, you hopeless sleepyhead. You know, you should've at least brought a blanket," she replied.

Ven scratched his head bashfully, then glanced back up at the sky.

"But—Did I dream that place up? It really felt like I'd been there before...gazing at the stars."

Somewhere else. That anxiety came creeping back into Aqua's heart ever so slightly. Again, she recalled the state Ven was in when he arrived. There was no denying that he came from somewhere else. But neither she nor Terra knew where that place was. Not even Ven knew—apparently, he'd lost all his memories of before.

Smiling to keep her worry from showing, Aqua ruffled Ven's hair. "We've always been together, haven't we?" she asked.

"Yeah...that's right."

Ven nodded, looked down for a moment, then sprang to his feet energetically. Still gazing upward, he walking to the edge of the cliff and plopped down again. When Aqua walked up beside him, Ven spoke with his eyes fixed on the heavens.

"Aqua..."

Aqua sat down next to Ven and looked at him expectantly.

"Y'ever wonder what stars are? Where light comes from?" he asked, intently watching the starry sky.

Stars—light, and also darkness.

They were difficult questions.

Aqua chose her words carefully as she answered. “Hmm. Well, they say...”

“That every star up there is another world.”

Behind them, a deep, clear voice finished Aqua’s sentence as she deliberated on how to respond—Terra’s voice.

The two turned around to see him walking toward them. He stopped just behind Aqua and Ven and looked up at the stars, too.

“Yep, hard to believe there are so many worlds out there besides our own. The light is their hearts, and it’s shining down on us like a million lanterns.”

Aqua, too, gazed up at the sky as she listened to Terra’s words.

Yes, the light was the radiance of the world’s heart. The hope of the people living within that world.

“What? I don’t get it.”

Ven tilted his head, unsure of what Terra was getting at. With a chuckle at Ven’s confusion, Terra shrugged and rephrased. “In other words, they’re just like you, Ven.”

Aqua’s chest tightened at Terra’s response. *Mm-hmm. Ven’s our light, too.*

“What does *that* mean?” Ven retorted, frowning with even more bewilderment.

“You’ll find out someday, I’m sure,” Terra teased, but Ven wasn’t having it.

“I wanna know now.”

“You’re too young to know now.”

“Quit treating me like a kid!”

They sounded exactly like two siblings in the midst of a squabble, and Aqua started giggling.

“Pfft...”

Terra turned to Aqua. “Hey, what are you laughing at?”

“I can’t help it. You two would make the weirdest brothers.” It was even funnier when she said it out loud, and she started laughing in earnest.

“It’s not *that* funny, Aqua.” Ven sounded upset, but there was a hint of mirth in his voice.

Terra began laughing as well, and even sulky Ven finally joined them.

If only they could stay like this forever...laughing beneath the starry sky.

None of them had been able to sleep.

Feeling just the slightest bit relieved, Terra looked at the backs of his two friends watching the sky.

Wide awake, he had stepped out for a breath of fresh nighttime air and seen Ven chasing after the meteor shower. He'd headed off after Ven, and found Aqua there at the peak, too. Before long, they were all laughing together like always. It helped relieve the stress of the exam tomorrow.

As soon as silence fell again, the three of them sat on the edge of the precipice.

There was a world full of life in each of those lights.

"Oh, yeah!" Aqua stood up and turned toward Terra. "Terra, you and I have our Mark of Mastery exams tomorrow. I made us good luck charms."

Aqua pulled out three glittering objects from her pocket. They were shaped like stars—or maybe flowers? The shape could be five petals linked together, but they also resembled stars.

Aqua tossed one each to Terra and Ven when they stood up after her. Orange for Terra, and green for Ven.

"I get one too?" Ven asked.

"Of course," she replied. In Aqua's hand was a blue star. "One for each of us."

Placing her charm in the palm of her hand, Aqua showed it to Terra and Ven, who followed suit and showed theirs as well. Three stars all in a row.

"Somewhere out there..." With the blue star in her palm, Aqua began to explain. "There's this tree with star-shaped fruit, and the fruit represents an unbreakable connection. So as long as you and your friends carry good luck charms shaped like it, nothing can ever drive you apart. You'll always find your way back to each other," she said, looking up at the sky until she finally turned to Terra and Ven with a smile. "Technically, I think you're supposed to make them with seashells, but I did the best with what I had."

Wanting to tease Aqua as she shrugged, Terra raised his amulet that gave off orange light to the sky.

"You are such a girl sometimes," he said.

"Hey, what do you mean 'sometimes'?" Aqua grumbled, but Terra grinned, unfazed.

Aqua could use Keyblades and magic about as well as he could. *Maybe even better*, Terra thought. She excelled at everything, and that's why he was just the slightest bit uncertain. Could he really become a Master tomorrow?

If only one of us can become a Master, then the one who deserves it more might even be...her.

"So this isn't a real good luck charm?" Ven's words dispelled the thought that had popped into his mind.

"Well, that's yet to be seen. But I did work a little magic on it,"

Aqua replied.

Ven grinned and asked, “Really? What?”

“An unbreakable connection.” Aqua raised her blue charm skyward. “No matter where we go, we’ll never truly be apart. And that power will see us through, I know it.”

“...Unbreakable connections, huh?”

Ven held his good luck charm up to the sky, too. *Our bond will never break, with or without these*, thought Terra. So Aqua was worried about tomorrow, too.

Pocketing his charm, Terra addressed the other two. “Well, tomorrow’s the exam. Anyone wanna spar?”

In Terra’s hand was a Keyblade. Ven happily slipped his amulet in his pocket and turned around to stand face-to-face with him.

“I can take ya!”

“Fine, bring it!”

Ven sprang forward. His Keyblade was fast and light, though Terra still had the advantage thanks to his size.

“Quit going easy on me!” Thoroughly disgruntled now, Ven swung his Keyblade. A quick glance away told Terra that Aqua was watching them with a smile.

Tomorrow he would probably have to cross Keyblades with her—and most likely in earnest.

With an exceptionally powerful blow, Terra knocked Ven’s Keyblade from his hand.

“Wah!” Ven fell on his rear.

Terra was briefly startled, but he hid it well as he helped Ven to his feet.

“You still have a ways to go.”

“Aw, man.” Ven sighed, standing and brushing off the dirt.

Aqua readied her Keyblade, too. Did she intend on starting a round with him right here and now?

“Try me now, Ven.”

Oh, it was Ven who Aqua wanted to fight. A hard-to-describe feeling rose in Terra’s chest, part disappointment and just a bit of relief.

“You’re goin’ down!”

Ven rushed forward with Keyblade in hand once more, but as with Terra, Ven wasn’t ready to beat Aqua yet. She nimbly avoided Ven’s attacks, fired off a little magic, and the contest was over in a flash. Ven tried to avoid the fireball and ended up stumbling.

“Are you okay?”

Aqua ran up to him in a panic, but Ven jumped to his feet without accepting her help and readied his Keyblade again.

“That one didn’t count. Let’s go again.”

"You're outmatched," Terra told Ven with a smile.

"C'mon, I just tripped."

"And that's part of why you can't win," Terra countered.

Sighing, Ven dismissed his Keyblade and grinned.

"Trust me, you guys are ready. You're gonna clean up at the exam tomorrow."

"I hope it's that easy," said Terra.

Aqua lowered her Keyblade, too, a complicated expression on her face.

"It's like the Master said: Power is born within the heart..."

A matter of the heart. It was heart—perhaps being just—not strength, that was required in a Keyblade Master. Still...

"When the time is right, you just need to look inside yourself, Ven. You lost because you tripped, but you tripped because you're a klutz."

"Hey, that's mean!"

Aqua laughed at Ven's retort. However, Terra felt her advice was meant for him.

My...my heart.

Terra looked at the starry sky to drive off the uncertainty.

The light of all those twinkling stars was the light of people's hearts. He would be fine.

"Hey, I think it's time to head back." Terra began walking, prompting the others to follow suit.

"Yeah. Me too!" Ven nodded and hurried after him.

"Together...always."

Turning back to Aqua as she responded, they saw her move to follow them, then stop in place and look at the night sky. In her hand was her Wayfinder charm.

Terra and Ven also stopped in their tracks and gazed above.

Another star fell.

"I wish the three of us could go stargazing again, and look for shooting stars."

"Shall we?" Aqua prompted.

Terra and Ven looked at each other and nodded. With that, the trio began walking.

In the darkness, Mickey proceeded forward aboard a magic tome, even as the rough waters battered him. His training was grueling as the apprentice of a powerful sorcerer—as a mouse seeking to become a Keyblade Master.

What's more, Mickey could not have been called the greatest of pupils.

Just then, a wave crashed into him head-on, tossing Mickey from atop the book.

Oh no, I'm gonna drown—!

Or so he thought, before he found himself on a very familiar floor.

Glowering down at him was the great wizard, and his master, Yen Sid.

Mickey scratched his head awkwardly and got to his feet, ready to hear his scolding from Yen Sid, but it never came.

“Mickey, I cannot shake the feeling something terrible is about to transpire...”

It was the last thing Mickey expected to hear. What exactly did he mean by “something terrible”?

From the window of the stately tower that served as his training ground, he could see the starry sky that brought together so many different worlds.

And among those stars, three shone brightest of all.

It was a crisp, clear morning.

Ven had overslept just a little, and he hurried to the hall where the exam was to be held.

The hall was filled with the light pouring in through the stained glass. Terra and Aqua were already lined up before the three chairs at the front. Their instructor, Master Eraqus, occupied the one on the left, and on the right sat an elderly man Ven had never seen before, leaving the center seat empty. The old man was bald and wrinkled, with a white beard and eyes gleaming gold. Ven tensed. He got the feeling those eyes had shifted over to him, fixing him with a hard expression.

Maybe that means I should get my act together.

Ven gave the creepy old man another look. Something felt...odd about him, but he couldn't put his finger on what before Master Eraqus's voice resounded through the hall.

“Today, you will be examined for the Mark of Mastery.”

Terra, Aqua, and even Ven instantly snapped to attention. Master Eraqus's thick black hair was tied back, and the distinguished beard around his mouth was well-groomed. He always carried himself with dignity, but today it was especially pronounced.

“Not one but two of the Keyblade's chosen stand here as candidates, but this is neither a competition nor a battle for supremacy—not a test of wills, but a test of heart. Both of you may prevail, or perhaps neither.”

Master Eraqus looked at Terra and Aqua in turn before turning to the old man. The old man nodded quietly.

"I am sure our guest, Master Xehanort, did not travel all this way to see our youngest prospects in years fall short of the mark. I trust you are ready."

"Yes," Terra and Aqua answered in unison.

So the elderly man was Master Xehanort. Examining the man's face once more, Ven thought he'd heard that name before. Maybe that strange feeling was because he recognized the name? But they couldn't have crossed paths in the past...

"Then let the examination begin."

Ven snapped out of a reverie for the third time at Master Eraqus's declaration.

The time had come.

Master Eraqus summoned his Keyblade into his hand and raised it high, and several balls of light appeared in the hall. Terra and Aqua readied their Keyblades. And then—for the briefest moment, Ven sensed something with a jolt.

What was that?

The balls of light meant to test Terra and Aqua began moving toward Ven. Master Eraqus, Terra, and Aqua all sprang into action.

"Ven!" they called.

But Ven summoned his Keyblade. "Don't worry about me. You two focus on the exam!"

This was nothing.

"But Ven—You're in danger here! Go wait in your room."

With worry in her voice, Aqua knocked away the ball of light before her and started running over.

"No way! I've been looking forward to this—seeing you two become Masters. I'm not gonna miss it now!" Ven called back, smacking away one of the lights himself.

As he battled with his own orb, Terra chimed in. "He can take care of himself. He's been out there training just as hard as us."

Ven was thrilled to hear that from Terra.

"Stay sharp, Ven."

And honestly, he didn't really mind Aqua's concern for him, either.

"Yeah!"

And with that, the three charged toward their respective balls of light.

Why was Ven suddenly involved in the test for the two of them?

After the lights had been extinguished, Aqua looked up at Master

Eraqus with questions in her mind. Those orbs should never go for someone who wasn't an examinee, like Ven.

Winded though he was, Ven was standing at the edge of the hall with just a hint of pride on his face, but she wanted to try and keep him out of harm's way if possible. He was training to become a Keyblade Master, though, so sometimes it was unavoidable. Still, she had been worried about him. What did Terra think of this?

"That was unexpected...but one must keep a still heart even in the most trying of circumstances," said Master Eraqus. "It was an excellent test, one I chose to let unfold. Which brings us to your next trial."

Aqua corrected her posture as he spoke. She was probably the one who panicked the most, and that was because her heart was still immature. It just meant she needed more training. Masters weren't supposed to make mistakes. Maybe the Master even sent the orbs after Ven on purpose.

"Now, Terra and Aqua, the two of you will face each other in combat. Remember, there are no winners—only truths, for when equal powers clash, their nature is revealed."

First they faced the unexpected to assess their strength of heart, and now they would face an equal. Aqua turned toward Terra, and seeing his perfect calm, she readied herself as well; likewise, Terra moved to face her.

"Begin!" Master Eraqus called.

Aqua and Terra both gripped their Keyblades and leaped.

Sparks were flying between their blades, and Terra could feel each blow in his fingertips.

This was the first time in a while he'd seen Aqua this intense. For a moment, he wondered if he could ever be a match for her strength.

Her strength? Or something else?

Terra put some distance between himself and his opponent to catch his breath, but she immediately closed the gap. Their Keyblades clashed again in a shower of sparks.

He didn't want to lose. He couldn't afford to.

Terra threw everything he had into knocking Aqua's Keyblade away and opened the distance again.

I need more—I need more strength.

He clenched his fist, and—*What is this power?*

An unknown force surged through Terra.

Something's wrong...

Unnerved, Terra opened the palm of his hand to suppress whatever the force was.

It was then that Master Eraqus's voice rang out.

“That is enough.”

Aqua was gazing at Terra intently. Nodding back at her and putting his Keyblade away, Terra returned to his initial position.

Did I just—? No, it'll be fine. I did the best I could. I gave it my all.

Master Eraqus took a step forward. Behind him was Master Xehanort.

“We have deliberated and reached a decision. Terra, Aqua, you both performed commendably. However, only Aqua has shown the Mark of Mastery,” Master Eraqus declared.

Terra was taken aback. This couldn't be possible.

“Terra, you failed to keep the darkness within you sufficiently in check.”

So that force was the power of darkness?

That's what that was...? There's darkness in my heart...?

“But there is always next time. That is all. Aqua, as our newest Keyblade Master, you are entitled to certain knowledge. Please wait here for further instruction.”

With that, Master Eraqus left, though Terra didn't remember much of what he said. As Ventus came running up to him, Master Xehanort took his leave as well. Aqua was watching him. Everything was too quiet, and something hurt in his chest.

“Hey...”

“Terra, I'm sorry...”

Aqua and Ven were both trying to talk to him, but Terra wasn't in the mood for conversation.

“...Sorry, but I need some time alone,” he said to both of them, and he walked away without them.

Someone was standing in the manor, waiting for Master Xehanort to exit the hall.

“Hmph...”

Vanitas had apparently witnessed the Mark of Mastery exam from afar, and he snorted in laughter at Master Xehanort. However, Master Xehanort himself didn't seem to mind his attitude at all.

“What do you make of Ventus?” he asked.

“He ain't gonna cut it. Somebody's gotta break that loser in,” Vanitas replied with amusement.

“Not here, you won't. I have to keep up appearances.”

“I know that. He just needs a little incentive to leave home.”

Masking his face again, Vanitas began walking. Master Xehanort's mouth curved into a grin as he watched him leave.

The worlds were astir, but there was still work to be done if they wanted to plunge them further into chaos.

Upon exiting the hall, Terra sat down on the stone steps of the yard and gazed into the palm of his hand. Failing the Mark of Mastery exam was bad enough, but the momentary burst of darkness within him troubled him more. Even frightened him.

He had learned something of the power of darkness. He also knew the fate of a heart consumed by it.

And that power—was in him.

He had been taught strength was necessary to conquer darkness of the heart. Strength of heart—strength of body. Honing his physical capabilities would bring strength of heart in due course. If he then trained his heart in the same manner, the power of his Keyblade grew as well. He had learned all this.

There's darkness within me...So what does that matter? I know I'm strong enough to hold it back.

“Yes...You are indeed strong.”

Terra turned around at the unexpected comment and found Master Xehanort standing there.

“Master Xehanort...” Terra dipped his head at the Master’s appraisal.

“And yet...how frustrating that Eraqus refutes its power. Why, you could train with him forever and still...you’d never be a Master in his eyes.”

Master Xehanort shook his head slowly, turned away from Terra, and began to leave; Terra followed right behind him. If Master Xehanort recognized his strength, then maybe he could save him from his newfound fear, too. From his fear of the darkness.

“But why? Help me understand, Master Xehanort. What is it that I have failed to learn?”

Master Xehanort turned back toward him slowly. “You are fine as you are. Darkness cannot be destroyed. It can only be channeled.”

Channel the darkness...

“Yes. Thank you, Master,” Terra replied, dropping to a knee before Master Xehanort. Placing a hand upon Terra’s shoulder, Master Xehanort smiled, then went back inside the hall.

Still bowing, Terra stared intently at the ground.

Terra...

Aqua lowered her head, staring at the pattern on the floor.

“...and insomuch as you are now Keyblade Master, you must always be conscious of—”

Master Eraqus’s words didn’t reach her at all. Though she had been recognized as a Master, her concern for Terra was greater than her joy for her own success.

Just then, an unfamiliar bell sounded. It was the alarm signaling trouble in the worlds. But who could have been ringing it?

“What is that?”

Master Eraqus turned the pedestal around. A mirror on the back of it had begun radiating light, and he stood in front of it and began speaking. Aqua knew the mirror was for communicating with other worlds, but she had never actually seen Master Eraqus use it to speak with someone.

What was going on...?

As Aqua watched Master Eraqus’s back uneasily, the doors opened behind her, and Terra came running in. He stopped alongside Aqua, facing the front of the hall.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Why isn’t Yen here?”

Everyone was supposed to assemble in the hall if the bell rang. Aqua’s gaze moved to the door anxiously.

“...Very well then, I will send my pupils to investigate,” said Master Eraqus, and the light faded from the mirror, suggesting the communication had ended. He then turned back toward a very tense Terra and Aqua.

“That was my dear old friend Yen Sid. As you know, he is Master no more, but he still keeps a close eye on the tides of light and darkness. His counsel serves as signposts on the road we wielders of the Keyblade must walk.”

Yen Sid—she had heard that name. He was the great sorcerer.

“All the more reason, then, for concern—for he tells me the princesses of heart are in danger. Not only from the forces of darkness, as you may assume, but also from a new threat—one that feeds on negativity. Fledgling emotions that have taken monster form—Yen Sid calls them the Unversed.”

The Unversed—beings spawned from negative emotions. Why were they here now...?

“As wielders of the Keyblade, you are tasked with striking down any who would upset the balance of light and darkness. The Unversed are no exception. I tried to pass this news on to Master Xehanort, but my repeated attempts to reach him have failed. I doubt there is any connection, and yet...This all troubles me.”

Master Xehanort had only just been here, but now he couldn’t be contacted? Where had he gone?

“Master Xehanort disappeared?”

Terra lowered his gaze. Both he and Aqua were visibly perturbed.

Master Eraqus continued. “So here we are. I need you two to get this situation under control. Eliminate the Unversed, and find Master Xehanort. I have unlocked the Lanes Between. You may use these

forbidden pathways to travel between this world and countless others. The darkness looms closer than usual within these spaces, but your armor will protect you. Lastly, remember that order must be kept. You cannot tell anyone there are other worlds. Now go, and fulfill your duty.”

“Yes, Master.”

Aqua and Terra responded in unison.

This mission had came out of nowhere. They had never been tasked with anything in such a manner. Was this part of being a Keyblade Master? Either way, the timing was too perfect. Something ominous was coming. Aqua could feel beads of sweat forming on her brow.

“Terra,” Master Eraqus said, and Terra raised his head. “Consider this an opportunity. A second chance for you to change my mind.”

“What?” Terra responded reflexively, his face filled with confusion.

“You must know, I care for you like my own son. If I could have my way, I would name you Master in a second...” Master Eraqus closed his eyes and trailed off momentarily, then looked at Terra once more and continued, “But how can I when you are so obsessed with power? Terra, you mustn’t be afraid of losing. Fear leads to obsession with power, and obsession beckons the darkness. You must never forget.”

Terra nodded at the Master’s advice and lowered his head.

“Thank you, Master. I swear, I will not fail you again.”

Terra’s expression when he stood up straight again was determined and severe. Aqua glanced at him, a little troubled.

Why am I so worried? Terra could never fall to the darkness.

Watching Terra turn on his heel and walk away, Aqua looked back to Master Eraqus and bowed.

“Master, I’d best be on my way.”

“Wait, Aqua. Before you depart, I have one other...Well, call it a request, of the utmost priority.”

“Yes?”

After he called her to a halt, Aqua looked at him expectantly. Master Eraqus returned her gaze steadily, albeit with a little moisture in his eyes.

“I told Terra this could be a second chance to show the Mark of Mastery...and I meant it. However, that flicker of darkness he displayed during the examination—I can sense it runs very deep. If he were to—If those powers were to prove too much for him to handle, I want you to bring him back to me at once. It’s for his own good. I could not bear to lose any of you to the darkness.”

The darkness lurking within Terra was small, but unfathomably

deep—perhaps Master Eraqus shared her worry.

“Of course. I would never let that happen. I promise you I will bring Terra back. Only this time, you’ll see he has what it takes to be a Master,” Aqua replied, then pressed her lips together.

The darkness would not take him on her watch.

“I’m counting on you.”

Aqua bowed firmly to Master Eraqus.

There was no way Terra could fall to that power.

Ven had returned to his room by himself. He wasn’t in the mood to watch Aqua’s confirmation as a Master—or maybe he just didn’t know what to say to Terra even if he did go after him.

Flopping onto the bed, he halfheartedly waved around a wooden “Keyblade.” It was the beloved practice sword he used to train with before he was allowed to inherit a Keyblade.

Why had Terra failed the exam? Far as he could tell, Terra and Aqua were on equal footing in terms of ability.

Just then, he heard the sound of a bell from far off.

The bell—it was the alarm that warned of a disturbance in the worlds. That sound meant he had to assemble in the hall.

Ven jumped off his bed and headed for the door.

“Better hurry, Ventus...or you’ll never see Terra again,” said a sudden voice.

Ven turned around. He should have been the only one here—but someone else was standing there. It was a youth about the same height as him, wearing a black bodysuit and a menacing featureless mask.

“What? Get real. I can see Terra anytime I want,” Ven snapped back at him.

The young man, Vanitas, leaned against the shelf and replied, “Like right now? He’s leaving you behind. And by the time you catch up...he’ll be a different person.” He sounded completely confident.

Ven wasn’t a fan of this guy’s attitude or what he was implying, and he raised his practice sword. “Look—whoever you are—you don’t know the first thing about Terra. Me and him will always be a team. You trying to pick a fight or what?”

Vanitas snorted derisively and walked off. “Oh, grow up. Is that what you call friendship? You’ll never know the truth unless you go out and look for it yourself. Come on, what could you possibly know when you’re stuck here, looking at nothing but what’s in your tiny world?”

Vanitas turned back to Ven for a moment, then stepped into the swirling darkness that had appeared before him. The darkness

vanished along with him.

What was that all about? Who was that guy?

Now Ven was really worried.

He dashed out of the room with his wooden sword still in hand. He sprinted down the stairs and leaped into the yard, searching for Terra. *There he is!* Ven ran up to him.

“Terra!”

Breathlessly, he tried to tell Terra about the boy he’d just met—only for Terra’s hand to drop onto his head and stop him in his tracks, then ruffle his hair.

“It’s okay.”

Okay? I never thought you weren’t okay. That’s not it. This guy said I’d never see you again—what do you think he meant?

But before he could ask, Terra tapped a portion of his shoulder guard, instantly covering his body in armor. As Ven watched, Terra smoothly tossed his Keyblade into the air, where it changed into its glider form, and quickly leaped aboard. It all happened so fast, Ven didn’t have a chance to get a word in.

But there was still so much more he had to say...

Right before Ven’s eyes, Terra’s Keyblade glider soared into a rift in space—the entrance to the dimensional corridor.

What the boy had said ran through the back of his mind.

“You’ll never know the truth unless you go out and look for it yourself.”

If so, then he had to go, too.

Like Terra, Ven tapped part of his shoulder guard to activate his armor. He then threw his Keyblade and jumped on once it took its glider form.

“Wait, Ven!”

He could hear Aqua’s voice in the distance, but he had to go—to see Terra again, and to confirm the truth for himself.

And so Ven flew after Terra into the corridor.

Vanitas watched Ventus set off on his journey from a corner of the yard and gazed at the ebon gateway where he had gone.

The die had already been cast. There was no need to panic. Ventus was sure to play his part well. And Master Xehanort was probably playing his role right about then, too.

“Wait, Ven!” he heard a woman call, and he hid himself in the shadow of a pillar. The voice had to belong to that nobody—Aqua.

“No! He mustn’t!” Master Eraqus cried out next. He had foreseen

that Aqua would go after Ven. Master Xehanort had said that Master Eraqus would be an obstacle to their plans, and Vanitas agreed.

He not only belonged to the light, but he knew the truth about Ven—and about Vanitas himself. Whatever kind of trap was set for Eraqus, Terra would undoubtedly be involved.

“You have to bring him back!” Master Eraqus ordered Aqua.

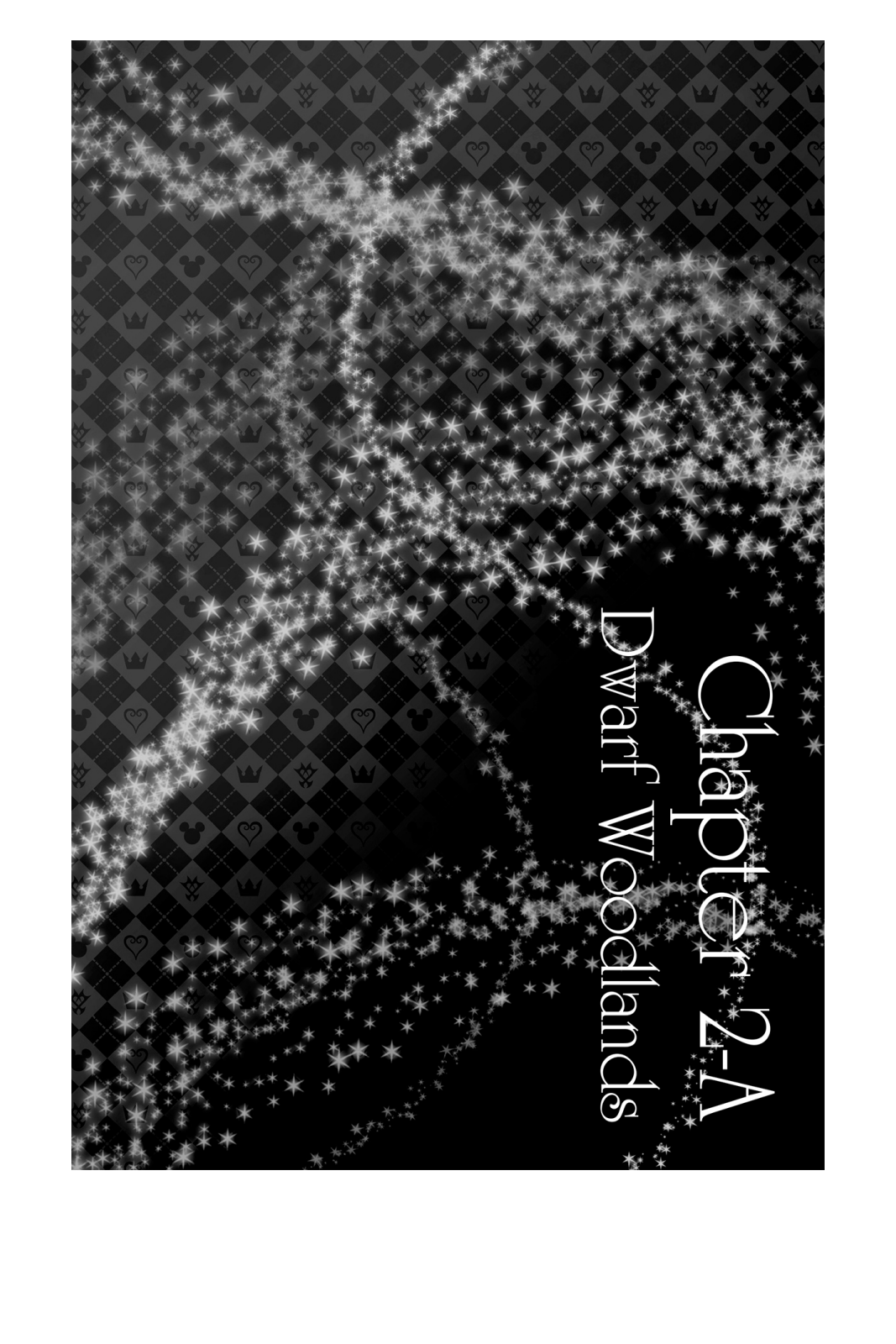
“Don’t worry, Master!” she replied. Assuming an armored form like the first two, she threw her Keyblade into the air and leaped aboard it. She then plunged into the gateway just as it was about to close.

Now all the players were heading for the stage—for the Ocean Between. Thinking it was about time he set off on his own journey, Vanitas opened a corridor of darkness—a black space connecting worlds.

“Master Xehanort...,” Master Eraqus whispered as he looked at the sky, just as Vanitas had. By the time he learned the whole truth, it would be too late for him.

Vanitas chuckled inside his mask as he stepped into the dark corridor.

It was time for the adventure to begin.



Chapter 2-A

Dwarf Woodlands

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Dwarf Woodlands

PROTECTED BY HIS ARMOR, Ven hurtled through the Ocean Between atop his Keyblade glider. *Still no sign of Terra. Where could he have gone?* Ven could see a radiant world in the distance with what appeared to be tiny fragments of stars afloat in it. A forest, a field of flowers, and—a hut...?

Ven sent his Keyblade racing toward it.

He landed on a craggy mountain, but farther ahead he could make out a dense wooded area. It was a bit exciting to visit a world he'd never seen before. The warmth of the air was different, the scent was new, and even the strength of the light shining down wasn't the same. He was seeing everything for the first time.

Ven recalled the view of the stars from the world he trained on. Terra had said that each one of those little lights was a world, so there were as many kinds of places to live as there were stars. Or maybe only his world was special, and all the others weren't much different from the one he was on now. *There's so much I wanna know*, thought Ven. He wanted to learn about all the different kinds of worlds.

Taking in the sights as he descended the mountain path, Ven sensed someone coming and peeked down from a ledge.

Seven dwarfs were marching along, each wearing a different color and shouldering a pickax. They were all keeping in perfect step with each other as they passed by below him...well, except the one at the end, who seemed a little off-rhythm.

Once the seven had entered a cave a slight distance away, Ven jumped down from the precipice and ran after them.

This was the world of the dwarfs—the Dwarf Woodlands.

Ven entered the mineshaft illuminated by the glow of sporadically placed lanterns. Gemstones glittered from the rugged walls, and the dwarfs were swinging their pickaxes to carve them out.

When Ven approached, a dwarf wearing glasses known as Doc turned around. "Huh? Who are you?"

“I’m Ventus. Call me Ven.”

As Ven tried to introduce himself with a smile on his face, another, much less pleasant dwarf called Grumpy cried out, “A diamond thief! Take cover, ya fools!”

The dwarfs broke into a run, fleeing from Ven and concealing themselves behind stones.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you.” At a loss, Ven scratched his cheek.

From behind a boulder, a fat dwarf, Happy, poked his face out. “You didn’t?”

“You mean you’re not here for our diamonds?” Next was a dwarf with a drowsy look on his face, Sleepy.

“That’s not nice, treating me like some kind of bad guy. I’m just trying to find a friend. His name is Terra. He’s dressed kind of like me, about yea tall—”

“Sounds like a tall tale to me! Go on, git!”

Ven desperately tried to explain, thinking that they would understand if they knew the details, but Grumpy stopped him short.

“We don’t know any Terra,” replied the pink-cheeked Bashful.

Letting out a small sigh of frustration, Ven asked, “Please...Could you come over here? I just want to talk.”

“Don’t fall for it! Stay where ya are!” Grumpy called out once again.

No choice, huh?

“All right. Then we’ll do this the hard way!”

Ventus dashed towards the dwarfs.

At nearly the same time, Terra touched down in the Dwarf Woodlands inside a gloomy castle some distance from Ventus’s location. This was the second world Terra had visited.

As he searched the surroundings he had landed in, he heard an unfamiliar voice. He concealed himself behind a pillar and tried to find the source.

“Slave in the Magic Mirror, come from the farthest space. Through wind and darkness I summon thee! Speak!” A woman wearing a long, black cloak with a crown on her head, the Queen, lifted both hands skyward before a large mirror, as if to gaze upon her entire self. A mysterious black flame roared within the mirror. “Let me see me thy face.”

At the Queen’s words, a giant masklike visage, the Magic Mirror, appeared within the looking glass.

“What wouldst thou know, my Queen?” An unnerving, unearthly voice resounded from the mirror.

“Magic Mirror on the wall, who is the fairest one of all?” the Queen asked of the Magic Mirror.

“Famed is thy beauty, Majesty, but hold—a lovely maid I see. Rags cannot hide her gentle grace. Alas, she is more fair than thee.”

“Alas for her! Reveal her name!”

“Lips red as the rose, hair black as ebony, skin white as snow.”

The Queen’s eyes flared at the description from the Magic Mirror. She hissed a name: “Snow White!”

“The heart of Snow White doth shine bright. Beware, my Queen, a heart of light,” the Magic Mirror intoned, further praising the girl, and disappeared.

A maiden—with a heart filled with light. Was this Snow White another princess of heart?

Terra’s brows furrowed as he recalled his own actions on the first world. Still, he had to do what he must now to make amends.

If Snow White was one of them, then Master Xehanort could have come to this world in pursuit of her. Terra stepped out from the shadow of the pillar and approached the Queen.

“Who goes there?” The Queen turned around to face Terra.

“My name is Terra. I’m looking for a man named Xehanort... Master Xehanort. I thought maybe you might have seen him.”

“That name is of no consequence to me.”

“I see. Sorry to bother you.”

When Terra turned away, the Queen addressed him from behind.

“Wait. Ah, yes...I have a task for you. If you succeed, I will ask the mirror where you might find this Master Xehanort.”

Terra faced her again, and the Queen gazed intently at him with an unpleasant smile on her lips.

“And the mirror will know?” Terra asked.

“Do you dare to question me?” the Queen snapped.

If her request didn’t sit well with him, then he just wouldn’t follow through on it.

“What is the task?” he prompted.

“There is a young maid who resides in this castle. Her name is Snow White. Kill her. And to make doubly sure you do not fail, bring back her heart...in this.”

The Queen handed a small box to Terra.

“Her heart? You mean her soul?”

“What I demand is her life. I have no interest in something so insubstantial as a soul.”

Insubstantial...? Then what was certain? Thinking for a moment, Terra ran up against a fundamental doubt and asked another question.

“What did this maiden do to you?”

“That is no concern of yours. Now, heed my words. My radiance is

all the light this kingdom needs.”

Terra found it hard to believe there was any radiance in this lady, but for now the mirror’s description of this light-filled Snow White had piqued his interest. He hadn’t the slightest intention of retrieving her heart as the Queen asked. As it stood, the probability of Snow White being a princess of heart was strong, so it would be best to meet with her.

“Where can I find her?”

“Outside the castle, there is a glade of wildflowers. You are dismissed. Go now and seek her there.”

“Got it.”

A malevolent grin appeared on the Queen’s face behind Terra as he walked away.

Exiting the mirror’s chamber, Terra dashed through the dimly lit castle. It was crawling with Unversed. Why had so many of them appeared in this world?

Terra made his way forward, cutting down the Unversed as he went. Upon emerging from the cellar into the courtyard, and then leaving the castle grounds, he found a plain so beautiful that the dark confines of the castle seemed like a dream. Amid the flowers in full bloom and the twittering birds was a young woman gathering flowers all alone.

Lips red as the rose, hair black as ebony, skin white as snow—this had to be Snow White.

She turned around as Terra approached.

“Oh, hello. Who are you?” she asked with a smile and not a hint of fear.

“Aren’t you startled?”

“Should I be?”

Terra could sense a pure radiance coming from Snow White where she cradled her flowers, her head inclined to one side. She really must be one of the princesses of heart.

“Is something the matter?”

“Does the name Master Xehanort mean anything to you?”

“Why...why, no. I don’t think I’ve ever heard that name,” Snow White answered.

“Now what...?”

So Master Xehanort hadn’t come here yet. Terra was puzzling over what he should do next when his train of thought was cut short by the sudden appearance of an uncanny presence nearby—

“Unversed!” Terra shouted, summoning his Keyblade to his hand.

“Eek!”

Frightened, Snow White ran off in the opposite direction of the castle.

“Hey, wait! Don’t go in there alone!”

Terra tried to go after her, but an Unversed blocked his path.

“Out of my way!” he shouted, bringing down his Keyblade. The Unversed fell with a single blow, but several more came to take its place, preventing him from getting by. Terra swung his Keyblade again and again.

After managing to find all seven of the dwarfs, Ven pled his case.

“Come on. I’m telling you, I’m no thief.”

“Ha! That’s what they all say. Well, we’re on to ya!” Grumpy retorted.

While one of the dwarfs looked at Ven with sympathy, the majority, especially Grumpy, didn’t appear inclined to believe him.

“...Fine, I get it. You want me to leave, I’ll leave.” Disappointed, Ven trudged toward the exit of the mine.

These were the first inhabitants of another world he’d ever met, and yet—*Hey, these guys probably aren’t the only ones who live here, right?*

Ven stopped and turned back to face the dwarfs. “Oh, but—can you tell me where I can find some other people around here?”

“There’s a castle beyond the chorus—I mean, the forest.”

“Got it. Well, thanks.”

Doc’s willingness to answer him in spite of everything brought a smile to Ven’s face, so he expressed his gratitude and left the mine behind.

While the dwarfs didn’t seem like bad people, he wasn’t going to have an easy time convincing them he wasn’t a thief.

Coming out of the craggy mountain where he’d first landed, Ven headed for the forest, but—

“Whoa, what?!”

His path was blocked by creatures he’d never seen before—the Unversed. When they leaped to the attack, Ven met them with his Keyblade and all of his frustration at the dwarfs’ false accusations.

“Not today!”

As he rushed over the rocky terrain, taking out Unversed as he went, Ven came upon a lone hut nestled in the woods. *Maybe this is where those dwarfs live?*

Ven was about to peek through the window and see what was inside, when he heard a girl scream.

“Eek!”

It came from the forest beyond the hut.

“Over there!” Ven dashed into the trees.

Unlike the well-lit woodlands from before, the sunlight didn’t reach this dim, humid place beneath the exceptionally tall and densely growing trees.

Ven spotted a girl hunched over and crying, and he ran up to her.

“What’s wrong?”

“These horrible trees—they tried to grab me.”

“Ah, it’s okay. You were probably just seeing things. It happens to all of us when we’re afraid.”

Ven placed a hand on her shoulder as he cheered her up. Aqua had once told him something similar.

The girl finally lifted her head. She was lovely, with white skin, red lips, and black hair.

“Oh, thank you. I feel quite better now. I’m sure I’ll get along, somehow. But...I do need a place to sleep at night. Would you know anywhere I might?”

“Well, I saw a house just up ahead. Come on, I’ll take you there.” Ven extended his hand to her, and she slowly got to her feet. “Oh, I’m Ventus. Ven for short.”

“Thank you, Ven. My name’s Snow White,” said the girl with a shy smile.

Good, she isn’t scared of me. Or convinced that I’m a thief.

“Great. Let’s get going!”

Ven began walking, leading Snow White by the hand.

Terra put away his Keyblade after the battle in the flowery meadow, taking a moment to catch his breath.

He’d completely lost track of Snow White while dealing with the Unversed, but she had said that she didn’t know anything about Master Xehanort. That meant the only lead he had on this world was that mirror.

Terra set off toward the castle.

Still, what was the deal with these princesses of heart anyway? What exactly was a heart full of light? Terra was sensitive to light, himself, but he’d never sensed it filling his own heart. Why was that?

He lacked the strength to suppress his darkness—but then there was Master Xehanort’s advice to just channel it. There was no denying its presence within Terra, but couldn’t that be said of everyone? Wasn’t it okay as long as the darkness didn’t take over? His doubts were rising again, and he wanted to pose the questions to Master Xehanort.

Terra passed through the courtyard and the dungeon to reach the mirror’s chamber again.

The Queen was standing facing the mirror.

“How dare you return here, you blundering fool!” She turned back toward Terra, brimming with anger.

“What are you talking about?”

“I ordered you to bring me Snow White’s heart!”

The Queen cut straight to the point. The mirror must keep her apprised of what was going on even far away.

“A request I chose to ignore. You know, you claim to be radiant, but all I see are shadows of jealousy, hanging thick on your heart,” Terra declared.

Right—and a heart must never sink into the darkness.

“You will pay for such insolence!” The Queen trembled with rage as she shouted, “Magic Mirror on the wall, consume this fool once and for all!”

Terra readied his Keyblade. However, the Magic Mirror said, “Alas, my liege, that I cannot do. I have no power save answers true.”

“You dare defy your queen?!”

The Queen shook with even greater ire, and an ominous red aura of negativity began to enshroud her.

Was that—the power of darkness?

When her wrath had reached its boiling point, the Queen took a flask containing a green chemical from a table and hurled it at the mirror.

The flask shattered, and the green chemical dripped down onto the Magic Mirror. The mask within groaned.

“Nnnngh...”

As the groan turned into a roar, a powerful light shone forth from the mirror.

“What?!”

Disoriented for a moment, Terra was sucked into the mirror.

Within was an abyssal space lined with eerie replicas of the mask.

Consumed by a dark heart, the Magic Mirrors moved to attack Terra. The rows seemed endless, like he was standing between two mirrors facing each other, but the real one had to be somewhere.

Taking down the fakes, Terra reached one mask whose expression was unlike the others’ and swung his Keyblade down through it. The mask turned out to be the real one, and just like that, the battle was over.

The mask let loose a cry—and Terra was cast out of the mirror with a flash.

“How did you escape?!” the Queen cried with a gasp. The Magic Mirror had already returned to normal.

“Now, you will ask the mirror: Where can I find Master Xehanort?” Terra prompted the Queen as he approached her with

Keyblade in hand. Her eyes still downcast in vexation, the Queen posed the question to the mirror.

“Magic Mirror, instruct this knave! Provide the answers he doth crave.”

The mask within was silent for a moment, then stated:

“Beyond both light and dark he dwells, where war was waged upon the fells.”

“That all?” Terra pressed. But it was in vain, as the mask kept its silence.

“Thanks. You’ve been a big help.”

With parting words to the mirror and Queen, Terra put away his Keyblade and walked off.

If Master Xehanort wasn’t here, then he had no further business on this world.

He had met Snow White, filled with light, and a Queen steeped in darkness. And a mirror that spoke the truth.

Which one would the mirror say he resembled more closely?

Musing to himself, Terra put this world behind him.

Having made it through the forest with Snow White in tow, Ven reached the safety of the cottage. The door was unlocked, allowing them to enter without any trouble. All the little necessities within were a bit on the small side, suggesting this really was where the dwarfs called home.

“I’m pretty sure you’ll be safe here...but sit tight while I look around.”

“Thank you...I’m ever so tired.”

“Get some rest,” he advised her, then stepped outside.

The dwarfs had yet to return. They’d yell at him even more and call him a thief again if they knew he snuck in uninvited, but there wasn’t anywhere else to keep Snow White out of harm’s way. Ven circled the cabin, deciding that it might be a problem if they found him alone, but maybe things would be different with Snow White here, too.

He didn’t find any Unversed, just a small stream with patches of flowers blooming along the banks behind the cottage.

Relieved, Ven went back inside.

“The coast is clear! Not a monster in sight—Huh?!”

Snow White was sitting on the floor, and around her were those seven dwarfs.

“Couldn’t stay away, couldja? An’ who invited you in, ya rotten thief?” Grumpy snarled.

“Oh no, he’s not a thief. He rescued me.”

Snow White defended Ven, but the dwarfs' suspicions wouldn't be so easily dispelled.

"You fussn't be mooled—uh, mustn't be fooled by him, princess," Doc cautioned.

"Just go on an' git!" Grumpy was raising even more of a ruckus.

"Please don't send him away. You see, he helped me when I was lost and oh, so very frightened," Snow White pleaded, lowering her gaze.

Was she that frightened?

Concerned, Ven asked her, "What happened?"

"Well, I was picking flowers by the wood, and there was a stranger there. He had a sword, but it was like a key, and then these monsters came," Snow White answered, gazing up at Ven.

"A sword shaped like a key...Terra!" Ven said to himself.

"Ya mean this stranger saw ya and set his horde of evil demons after ya?" Doc said with a sidelong glance at Ven.

"Terra would never do that!" Ven denied the idea vehemently.

"Oh, of course. I'm sure he wouldn't. Not if he's someone who's your friend."

With the dwarfs around her, Snow White seemed a bit uneasy.

"Princess, you trustn't be so musting—er, trusting," Doc cried out, and Snow White looked at Ven sadly.

"He's a-lyin'! Mark my words."

It didn't seem like words were going to get the dwarfs to believe him.

"I'll prove it!"

Ven dashed from the cottage.

If the man Snow White mentioned *was* Terra, Ven might be able to meet up with him.

As when he saved Snow White earlier, the gloomy forest was teeming with Unversed.

"Back off!"

Ven was worried he might miss Terra if he didn't hurry. He cut through the Unversed desperately, not wanting to waste any time. Rushing out of the forest, he came to the field with its abundant flowers.

"Terra!" Ven shouted, forgetting to dismiss his Keyblade. No response. He ran farther into the field, searching. Unfortunately, there was no trace of Terra.

"Aww."

Ven stopped and lowered his head.

I wanted to find him...

Just then, he spotted something by his feet.

"Huh?"

A red apple had rolled over to him. Ven picked it up and looked around. A short ways off, an old woman was hobbling along with a basket of apples.

"Excuse me, ma'am? You dropped this." Ven hurried up to the old woman and handed her the apple.

"Oh, why thank you, my pet. To tell the truth, I really don't know what I would have done without that. Ee-hee-hee-hee..."

She took the apple with a creepy laugh, but she started when she saw what Ven had in his other hand.

"Haven't I seen that sword before?"

"Terra has one. You know Terra?" Ven inquired. While there was no guaranteeing that she knew Ven's friend just because she'd seen a Keyblade before, he had to ask.

The old woman's answer was the last thing he expected to hear, though.

"Oh, yes, yes...That ruffian pointed one of those at me, asking about some 'Xehanort'—My poor heart nearly stopped."

Terra threatened an elderly woman? No way. He'd never do that. Still, Snow White had said that she was attacked by unknown monsters after encountering a man with something like a key.

"That doesn't sound like him at all..." Reassuring himself that her story couldn't be right, Ven asked, "Ma'am, where did Terra go?"

"I'm sure I have no idea...Must you all menace a poor granny so?"

The old woman's body trembled in fear.

"What? No, I was just..."

I—I'd never do that, and neither would Terra.

But...if what everyone on this world is saying is true—Why am I even thinking about this?

Watching the old woman walk off toward the forest with her big basket, Ven let out a slow sigh. He looked toward the sky.

"Terra...What did you do?"

Terra probably wasn't on this world anymore. Ven had to go to another and ask after him.

Ven opened the Lanes Between in search of a new world.

"Good—let those doubts take over," Vanitas muttered as he watched Ven set off once more from a distance. The greater Ventus's doubt grew, the more turmoil his heart would be in, and the more he would waver. That was the plan, or part of it, anyway.

Vanitas began walking toward the forest and saw the old woman—the transformed Queen—step out of the trees.

"Now, let's hope she plays her part, too."

Vanitas smirked, and the dim forest stirred as Unversed appeared

around him.

Summoning a corridor of darkness, Vanitas vanished.

Snow White timidly accepted the red apple offered by the old woman and took a bite. As a mysterious smile appeared on her guest's wrinkled lips, Snow White let out a small cry and collapsed onto the floor.

"Now I'll be the fairest in the land!" the old woman crowed with laughter. She was actually the Queen—Snow White's stepmother. Still cackling, she left the house. A storm was brewing outside the home of the dwarfs. Flashes of lightning illuminated the sky.

"It's the witch!" Grumpy shouted from atop a deer, and the Queen fled in panic. The dwarfs wouldn't pursue if she returned to the castle. She hurried through the gloom of the forest, climbing a precipice.

She had to escape...!

But the dwarfs were dogged pursuers.

Reaching the top of the cliff, the Queen looked down upon the dwarfs—and soon after, she met her fate.

But Snow White would awaken no more.

Unable to bear the thought of Snow White and her remarkable beauty buried beneath the earth, even in death, the dwarfs placed her in a casket of glass and gold, and prayed by her side each day.

It was some time later that Aqua arrived in the forest.

Outside a small cottage in the trees, the dwarfs hung their heads, hats removed. In front of them was a large glass box of some sort.

"What has happened here?" she asked.

The dwarfs raised their heads in turn.

"Poor Snow White..." The dwarf in glasses, Doc, sighed and then lowered his gaze from the glass box. What could possibly be inside it?

Aqua knelt down and peered inside. Within was a beautiful girl with red lips, ebony hair, and white skin, asleep and surrounded by flowers.

This box—was a casket.

Lowering her eyes, Aqua turned back to the dwarfs.

"She was just as sweet as could be."

"She sang us purty songs."

"And made us smile."

"She told us wonderful stories."

"About fallin' in love, an' the prince she'd met."

“An’ when we went to work, she gave us all a kiss...”

“She was so full of kindness—why, she made better folk of all of us.”

The dwarfs each voiced their memories. So this girl was called Snow White.

“From what you’ve said, she must have been very loved. But how did this happen to her?” she inquired.

The dwarfs were so despondent that she wanted to help them any way she could. What’s more, as far as she could tell, Snow White didn’t appear to be dead inside her coffin.

“A wicked Queen was horribly jealous of our dear Snow White’s beauty. So she used her evil magic to change into an old hag, and then she gave Snow White a poisoned apple,” Doc explained, no longer able to hold back his sobs.

“An’ by the time we got here...Well, it was just too late. We found the princess as still as can be...Nothing we could do would wake her.” The fat dwarf, Happy, sniffled.

“Isn’t there some way we can help her?” Aqua asked.

The dwarfs looked at one another.

“Well, not unless somebody braves the castle,” Happy explained, as the dwarfs lowered their heads again.

“All you fools can stay here doin’ nothin’. But I’m not afeared’a goin’, not even to that witch’s lair!” Grumpy shouted, ready to march on the castle then and there.

“You’ll never make it. The castle’s supposed to be guarded by magic an’ crawling with monsters.” Doc stopped him.

A horde of monsters might be too much for them. In that case...maybe I should go.

Aqua stood up beside the casket.

“All right. Then I’ll go.”

“You will?” Bashful said hesitantly.

“I will. Leave it to me.”

“Well, all right, my dear. We’d be much obliged,” Doc replied, then began to sob again.

“Could you point me toward the castle?”

“It’s just beyond this forest,” Happy answered.

“Okay.”

Nodding firmly to Happy, Aqua went on her way.

She couldn’t just ignore anyone in distress.

The forest beyond the cottage was sinister and rotten with Unversed.

“What is this...?” Aqua whispered, clearing out the Unversed. There were so many of them even in the first world she visited. Could

the troubles of this world have something to do with Snow White's slumber?

As Aqua wondered what she would have to do to awaken the princess from eternal sleep, her thoughts led back to a certain memory.

It was from several years ago. Ven had collapsed soon after arriving at the Land of Departure, and he'd been unconscious ever since.

"Ventus, why won't you wake up?" she had asked Ven as he lay asleep in bed. Snow White's slumbering face reminded her of his. She had thought Ven might never awaken back then, too.

Everything would be fine, though. Snow White would wake up.

Aqua passed through the flowery field and reached the castle. A menacing atmosphere permeated it as well.

She spotted in the courtyard a comely young man, dressed in white clothes and a red cape. He seemed very out of place at the forbidding castle.

"Is something wrong?" Aqua addressed the young man.

"This castle—it's different somehow. And I can't find the princess or hear her beautiful voice. Was it all a dream?" The youth responded in a pleasant voice befitting his handsome appearance.

"Wait. You mean you know Snow White?"

"Oh yes, we met once. It was a song that drew us together...Has something happened to the princess?" the young man asked Aqua, his fine brows drawn together.

"Yes, I'm afraid so...The wicked Queen tricked her into eating a poisoned apple."

"I must go to her! Where is she?"

His face paled at her story. No doubt about it—he was in love with Snow White. Actually, one of the dwarfs had said something to that effect.

"In the woods, guarded by seven kind dwarfs."

"I will find her. Perhaps there is a way I can help."

Bowing sharply, the young man ran off.

"I have to do what I can..."

Aqua continued farther into the castle, which was infested with Unversed. Perhaps they had been summoned by the darkness of the Queen the dwarfs had mentioned?

She fought her way through an underground dungeon and found a room with a large mirror in it. The place felt strange.

"Something's not right."

Aqua walked up to the looking glass in the back of the room. The moment she did, the Magic Mirror gave off a flash of light and drew her inside.

“What?”

She was in a realm of blackest darkness, where several masks hovered around her. They encircled her, then went on the offensive.

“...Are these the Unversed?”

Bringing up her Keyblade, Aqua cut her way through the masks.

It's no use; there's just too many...

The masks came after her in an endless succession; she was getting worn down. Trying to defeat them all was futile, and as Aqua searched for some way out, she noticed one with a different expression from the others’.

So that was the real one!

When the mask was destroyed, light enveloped Aqua’s body and she found herself back in the room from before.

“What is going on?” she muttered as the light faded from the mirror before her.

“The Queen is gone, my service done. Adieu, adieu, O victorious one,” declared the mask within the mirror. It vanished, and as it did, the evil presence enshrouding the castle lessened.

So darkness attracted more darkness. All the same, Aqua didn’t know how to revive Snow White...

She left the castle behind her and headed back to the dwarfs.

The young man gazed intently into Snow White’s face. Around him, the dwarfs were weeping. In the end, they had failed to help her.

As Aqua stepped closer, he placed his lips to Snow White’s. Before the despondent youth, Snow White stirred, then opened her eyes.

“Princess!” Aqua cried.

Stretching slowly, Snow White sat up and extended her hand to the young man. The dwarfs embraced one another in joy as the young man swept Snow White up in his arms.

“That’s so sweet. It’s just like a miracle...,” Aqua whispered with a smile.

Ultimately, she didn’t...*couldn’t* do anything to help. And yet, Snow White woke up all the same. Just like back then, when Ven awoke.

Ven had been asleep for so long, and then he suddenly regained consciousness. Still dazed, but awake, at least.

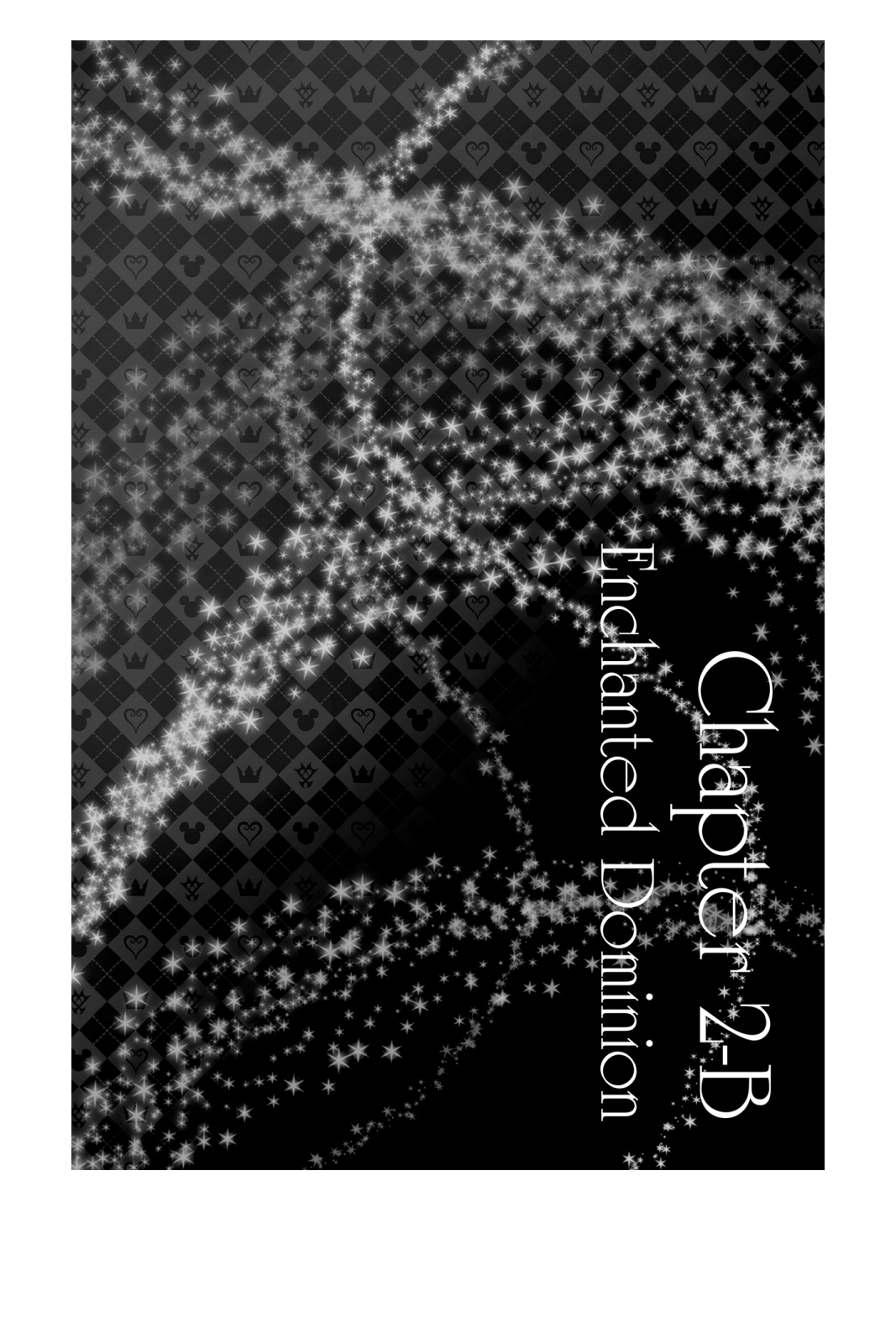
Snow White gave each one of the overjoyed dwarfs a kiss on the face, and then she and the young man walked off hand in hand.

The dwarfs cheered them, at once both happy and the tiniest bit sad.

Snow White and the prince had set off on a journey. Awakening was the first step to a new adventure. Maybe—a journey was waiting

for Ven, too, she mused.

Aqua turned away from the celebrating dwarfs and quietly took her leave of this world.



Chapter 2-B

Enchanted Dominion

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Enchanted Dominion

“WITH THIS POWER, YOU CAN CLAIM THIS WORLD AS YOUR OWN.”

So declared this old man who called himself Xehanort. Within her enchanted castle, Maleficent laughed heartily. Her intuition was correct; this tiny little world was not all the cosmos had to offer.

“Seven pure lights, you say?” Maleficent gazed at the beautiful sleeping princess on the bed.

“Yes—and a Keyblade. All yours for the taking.”

“Hmm. I have no intention of doing your bidding. Still, this does appear to align with my own interests. I shall cooperate with you for now.”

“You have my thanks.”

As Master Xehanort made his exit, Maleficent turned her attention to another in the corner of the room.

“And you? Are you a friend of this man?”

A lone boy appeared from the shadow of a curtain—Vanitas.

“A friend...? What do you mean by that? What about you? Are you a ‘friend’ of his?”

Vanitas countered Maleficent’s query with his own.

“Yes, I suppose I could call him an ally with a common goal.”

“Then sure. I guess I’m the same.” Vanitas smirked. “Have fun with those three,” he told her before leaving the room.

She had only just become the ruler of this world. Sensing the day approaching when she would rule over all worlds, Maleficent erupted into laughter.

This was the land steeped in magic—the Enchanted Dominion.

Terra reflected on what had happened before he visited the Dwarf Woodlands.

The first place he had touched down after leaving the Land of Departure was a tranquil forest overlooking a beautiful lake.

Approaching the edge of the water, he looked up at the sky. The

sunlight was hazy, and silence hung heavy over him. In fact, he couldn't even sense the presence of anything living in this too-quiet world. Were there any worlds that were truly lifeless?

But the air shimmered with negativity, and when he whirled around, a horde of Unversed had appeared.

Summoning his Keyblade, Terra charged into the midst of the throng.

This many wouldn't be a problem for him.

Perhaps frightened by Terra's ferocity, one Unversed fled toward the edge of the forest.

"No you don't!"

Terra was crashing through the woods after it when he suddenly arrived at a path, and he could see a gigantic castle ahead. A long stone bridge stretched toward the keep, almost beckoning him. After dealing the finishing blow to the straggler, Terra lifted his eyes to the enormous citadel. He still didn't see any people, though—until he looked back down and spied someone in a black cloak with a long staff in hand, similarly observing the castle.

The figure turned around slowly at Terra's approach. Wrapped in robes of black and purple, the woman had an odd ambience hanging about her. Who was she?

"What's this...? Why aren't you asleep, boy? That fool Flora cast a spell to put everyone in this castle into a deep, deep slumber."

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Why, I am Maleficent," replied the woman lightly, "as all who dwell in this kingdom would know. Now you must reciprocate the introduction. Who are you?"

"I'm Terra. What do you know about those monsters—the ones who attacked me?" Terra questioned. He still didn't know who she was. It was possible the Unversed had appeared in this world long before they had been discovered.

"Hmph. Now why would I give a thought to creatures so base...so inconsequential?"

"They are base, that's for sure," he agreed, walking closer to Maleficent.

If she did not care for the Unversed, then the enemy of an enemy was a friend. In short, Maleficent was, at least for now, no foe of his.

"Anyway, I'm looking for someone. Ever heard of a man named Xehanort?"

"That name is not familiar to me. Is he an outsider, like yourself?"

Terra regarded Maleficent wordlessly. Understanding that she would not receive an answer, Maleficent turned her back to Terra and then responded.

"Oh, but wait...I do remember someone leaving the castle."

“Tell me—what was he doing there?”

An unfamiliar man? Master Xehanort?

“I couldn’t say...I can only be certain he was not from this kingdom. If you’re curious, go see the castle for yourself. There—the entrance is past the bridge.”

“Thanks.”

Giving her a quick bow, Terra ran off in the direction of the citadel. Maleficent called out to his back.

“Perhaps he did speak, about imprisoning ‘the light’...That could be so many things. Could he have meant Princess Aurora?”

“Aurora...” Terra mused without turning around, then dashed off again.

Behind him, Maleficent vanished in a shroud of green flame.

Terra hurried through the great hall and deeper inside. Though he found no traces of any people within it, there were plenty of Unversed in their place.

What was going on with this world?

As he took down the Unversed, Terra discovered a sealed room near the end of a passage on the second floor. A Keyblade could remove such a seal.

His Keyblade emitted a glow when he held it up, unlocking the door.

He stepped into the chamber to find what looked like someone’s bedroom. A woman lay asleep atop a large canopied bed.

Was she Princess Aurora?

Terra looked at the girl breathing softly in her sleep. He sensed a great light within her.

“This feels so familiar...” Terra muttered.

He knew the warmth of light well—it was the feeling he’d learned about for so long during his training to become a Keyblade Master. However, this was the first time he had ever felt it so strongly.

Just then, he realized someone was behind him and turned around. It was Maleficent.

“Her heart is filled with light—not the slightest touch of darkness. Just the kind of heart I need,” she stated, walking up alongside Terra.

“For what?” Terra asked Maleficent.

A heart of pure light—in other words, she was one of the princesses of heart that Master Eraqus had mentioned.

“Imagine with me, the most glorious of futures...Seven of the purest hearts, each overflowing with light. When brought together, they grant the power to rule all worlds.”

“What do you mean?”

He didn't quite understand what Maleficent was getting at.

She wanted to collect hearts? How?

"Why, that key you hold...The Keyblade, is it called?"

Someone from another world knew about Keyblades? Was that possible? Even if she was a special case, she still knew too much.

"Where did you learn that name?" Terra summoned his Keyblade and readied it.

"That trinket is the only way to obtain the hearts."

Could this woman have met the Master?

"No more games. Where is Master Xehanort?"

Despite Terra's stern expression, Maleficent chuckled confidently. "Impudence will get you nowhere, child. If you wish to learn more, you must retrieve the heart of Aurora."

Maleficent flung back her cloak in a burst of green flame.

"And why would I ever want to do that?"

"It's not a matter of 'why,' but of 'will.' In your heart, there is darkness just waiting to be awakened." Maleficent's mouth twisted into a grin. She was speaking as if she had been present for his Mark of Mastery exam not so long ago.

"I dunno what you're talking about."

"Perhaps not yet..." A powerful glow arose from the staff Maleficent held, and it eventually engulfed Terra in a suffocating wave. "But I have power over sleep. And I can awaken what's inside you...Then you will be free to be who you truly are."

Maleficent's words echoed through his head like an incantation.

Darkness enfolded his world.

Within it stood Master Eraqus.

"Remember that darkness lurks in every heart.

"Darkness is our foe.

"Would that we could be rid of it.

"You must destroy it.

"Push the darkness down—give it no quarter in your heart."

Terra had heard him say these things over and over during his days of training. How could he fail to suppress the darkness after so much instruction?

What had he done wrong?

Why had he come to this?

Somewhere through his hazy consciousness, Terra got the feeling he was holding his Keyblade over Princess Aurora. The glow from it was drawn into her chest, and before he knew it, a wondrous radiance was rising up from it. Princess Aurora's heart. Was this a heart of pure light, unclouded by a speck of darkness?

The brilliant orb arced directly toward Maleficent's hand, where it

was consumed in a green blaze.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh...Here it is...Just what I’ve waited for. To think that all he spoke of was and will be true.”

Maleficent chuckled—and Terra returned to his senses.

His head was heavy. Everything hurt. He felt sick.

“What? How did I...?”

Before him was Princess Aurora—but he could no longer perceive the light within her from moments ago.

Terra wheeled around on Maleficent. “What did I do?” he shouted. “What did *you* do?”

“You speak as if I pulled some invisible strings. No, you couldn’t be further from the truth, child. I simply whispered to the darkness you already held inside.”

“How could I do this?”

Princess Aurora’s sleeping form atop the bed reminded him of Ven when he was asleep for so long. Terra had even started wondering if he would ever wake up at all, though such a thing shouldn’t be possible.

“Yes...Now, you want to know where Xehanort went. Well, that I cannot answer. He disappeared into the darkness.” As Maleficent explained, Terra fixed her with a glare. “But now I know the Keyblade is necessary to gather hearts. Join me. Collect six more hearts of pure light. Then we will rule all the worlds together.”

Maleficent’s green blaze rose yet again. However, Terra had no intention of doing her bidding a second time.

“You seem to be mixed up. I’m a peacekeeper, not a tyrant!” he shouted, bringing his Keyblade to bear once more. He was about to challenge Maleficent to battle when the castle rumbled.

“Hmm...For a peacekeeper, you’re off to an exceptionally poor start.” Maleficent’s viridescent flames swirled around her. “Remember this—the darkness in your heart cannot be held back by force or strength. Now...my work here is done, as is yours. Wasn’t there someone you needed to chase?”

“Wait!”

Terra swung his Keyblade at Maleficent as she vanished with a cackle. Unfortunately, he was a breath too late.

The only ones left in the room were Terra and the princess.

He looked at Princess Aurora where she lay asleep on the bed. Her light had been stolen thanks to the weakness of his own heart...

No amount of regret would ever be enough, but...

Terra spoke to Princess Aurora.

“It’s my fault your light was stolen. It was because I was weak... I’m sorry. I’ll get your light back—once I learn to stand up against the darkness.”

And with that, Terra left the room to defeat the Unversed.

The strength to overcome the darkness. Could he truly obtain such a thing?

Terra worried his lip as he did away with the Unversed.

What had Master Xehanort spoken to Maleficent about in this world? If he was the one who imprisoned the light of Princess Aurora's heart, then why had he allowed Terra to do what he did? Would Terra discover his true intent if he sought out the hearts of pure light?

Would Terra be controlled by darkness on the other worlds he visited, too? Would the darkness overtake him once more? The battle raging in his soul was perhaps more important than his conflict with the Unversed.

After the monsters fell and he left the castle, Terra stood on the long bridge and looked to the sky.

There was no time to hesitate. He had to be on his way.

Terra dashed off toward a new world.

Maleficent watched Terra from above as he departed the castle.

"Seven pure hearts, each completely void of darkness...Such a search may take some time."

Maleficent grinned. Manipulating hearts vulnerable to the darkness was nothing for her. Even if Terra did win out over his own corruption, another teetering on the brink between light and dark would come along soon enough.

Cloaking herself in green flames, Maleficent vanished.

Ventus arrived inside a huge castle.

"Still no sign of Terra..."

He'd been to two worlds so far, and he hadn't found Terra on either one.

Ven sighed as he trudged down a corridor laid with magnificent embroidered rugs.

Despite inspecting each room as he went along, Ven never found anyone at all, much less Terra.

What he did find with surprising regularity were the Unversed.

Had they done away with all of the keep's inhabitants...?

Ven worked his way deeper into the castle, taking out Unversed along the way. One more chamber and he would be done with this floor.

He opened the door of the room at the end of the hallway to find

a large bed with a very beautiful woman asleep on top of it. It was great to finally find another human and all, but what was the point if she was out cold? Would she get mad if he woke her up...?

"Stop, you get away from her!" a woman's voice sharply called, causing Ven to turn around in a panic. There were three ladies standing—well, floating there. One was dressed in red, one in blue, and the last in green, and all three had a pair of small wings sprouting from their backs and small sticklike wands in their hands.

Maybe they weren't ladies at all, but...fairies?

"Oh, I'm sorry. It's just I've never seen anyone so beautiful."

"Who are you?" The fairy dressed in red, Flora, fluttered in a circle around Ven.

"I'm Ventus. But you can call me Ven."

"Oh...You don't seem bad, dear. I'm certain you have a pure heart, just like our precious Aurora," said the fairy in green, Fauna.

"Can you tell me why she's sleeping?" Ven inquired.

"Long ago, Maleficent cursed her. Now she's stolen her heart," replied the fairy wearing blue, Merryweather.

A princess, a witch, and fairies...It sounded like something out of a storybook.

Ven fell into thought. He *did* have to look for Terra, but of course he was going to help anyone in distress that he met.

"Well then, why don't I go get it back for her?" he offered.

The fairies exchanged sad glances.

"That's impossible, dear. Maleficent's home is at the Forbidden Mountain. It's not safe," Fauna explained in a defeated tone.

"I'm not afraid. We can't just leave Aurora like this. I can help. You gotta believe me. C'mon, let's go get her heart!"

The fairies listened to Ven's words apprehensively, but then Flora spoke as if she'd made up her mind.

"You know, you're absolutely right. The Forbidden Mountain is through the forest. Come along—follow us."

"Yes, I agree. We were so frightened on our own, but if you're with us..." Fauna added, and Ven gave an enthusiastic nod.

"Leave it to me!"

Ven walked along the stone-hewn bridge from the castle with the fairies in tow.

"Where is everyone?"

"The people and animals near the castle are asleep," Flora explained. "It's all because of Maleficent."

"This Maleficent sounds like a real troublemaker." Ven stopped and crossed his arms.

Now that he thought about it—hadn't he been asleep for a long time, too? Or was that a dream? The memory felt almost like a dream within a dream.

"If only she hadn't placed that curse all those years ago..." Fauna clenched her wand and lowered her gaze.

"No use dwelling on the past," Flora rebuked her.

"A curse? Did Maleficent's curse take Aurora's heart?"

Ven didn't know what the fairies were talking about.

Wasn't Aurora asleep because she had been robbed of her heart?

"No, dear. To tell the truth, she should only be in a deep slumber."

"But then her heart was stolen, too."

Flora and then Merryweather elaborated.

"And so poor Aurora will wake only by true love's first kiss." Fauna wiped away tears as she spoke.

"Maleficent was never able to steal hearts before," Fauna mused. "I don't know how she learned to do it."

"Maybe she got help from those monsters prowling around," Merryweather replied.

"Monsters...Do you mean the Unversed?" Ven said.

"Oh, is that what they're called...? They were in the castle, too, weren't they? Oh, how terrifying." Fauna shuddered.

The Unversed aided Maleficent? Could they even do that? What if she got help from someone else? There was still so much they didn't know. And yet...

"Let me deal with the Unversed. We need to get Princess Aurora's heart back, right?" Ven grinned, gripping his Keyblade.

"Yes, I'm sure you'll be a great help. The Forbidden Mountain is on the other side of the forest."

Flora led the way. Ven and the other two fairies followed after her.

Outside the woodlands was a precarious crag, and beyond it loomed a sinister keep.

"This is Maleficent's fortress."

"Oh, how frightening."

Fauna and Merryweather shivered at the very sight of the castle and huddled close to each other.

"Come, let's be on our way," Flora urged.

Ven nodded, and they climbed the hill and rushed inside the gates.

The interior of the fortress was dimly lit and stank somewhat of bloodshed. And while they had expected it to be full of Unversed...

“Oooh, Maleficent’s little stooges are everywhere...” Merryweather cried out. There were no Unversed to be found; rather, there were throngs of bird people with bows and porcine-faced demi-humans wielding spears.

“I’ll take care of ’em!” Ven shouted and rushed off to scatter Maleficent’s minions.

Actually, the fairies had suggested Maleficent was receiving help from the Unversed, but there weren’t any Unversed in the castle. If so, wouldn’t that mean that she wasn’t calling on their strength...? Or maybe she didn’t want them in her bastion?

More questions he couldn’t wrap his head around.

Who had lent Maleficent their power?

“It must be this way!”

The deeper they delved into the fortress, the more labyrinthine it became. Ven plunged ahead with the fairies guiding the way.

“...It’s Aurora’s heart!” Flora cried out, pointing at a bright orb in the courtyard.

Even wreathed in an unnerving green glow, it still shone beautifully. Ven rushed up alongside the fairies and peered at the light.

Princess Aurora’s heart radiated with an exceptional dignity and comforting energy, even in the murky confines of the fortress.

“How do we get it back?” Fauna fluttered around Princess Aurora’s heart in bewilderment.

“I bet we just need my Keyblade—”

If there was a seal, a Keyblade should be able to take care of it.

“—and then we can free her heart!”

Nodding at Merryweather, Ven held his Keyblade up to Aurora’s heart. As he did, his weapon flashed with a clear gleam much like that of the heart itself.

The wicked green shroud dissipated, and Princess Aurora’s heart floated softly upward.

“That should undo the curse.”

As Ven quietly spoke to himself, Princess Aurora’s heart glowed especially bright.

In the forest, a man was speaking gently to the frightened Princess Aurora.

“Don’t you remember? We’ve met before.”

“We...we have?”

“Why, of course. You said so yourself. Once upon a dream.”

Princess Aurora beamed brightly at those words. The two of them drew closer to each other.

"I never thought I would meet you—outside of my dreams, that is," she whispered ecstatically.

"Who are you? What's your name?"

Princess Aurora shook her head at the man's questions, then pulled away as if to flee.

"Hmm? Oh, my name...Why, it's...Oh, oh no, I can't..." She turned away and started to run. "Good-bye."

But the man caught hold of her hand.

"I must see you!"

"I don't know, maybe someday."

Princess Aurora lowered her gaze and shook her head.

"When? Tomorrow?"

"Oh, no. This evening! At the cottage, in the glen."

With that, Princess Aurora dashed into the woods and out of sight.

The radiance subsided.

Ven tilted his head quizzically, blinking a few times. *What in the world...?*

"What was that?" he wondered.

"Aurora's memory. She must have gotten her heart back," Flora answered.

Princess Aurora's dream. The princess had glowed with happiness when the man from her dreams had reunited with her in the real world.

"So her dream came true!" Ven whispered. As he did, a kindly smile appeared on Flora's face.

"Yes, not long ago. Dreams are very strong beliefs. Aurora's led her to her true love."

Strong beliefs...So if you wish for your dream fervently enough, it'll come true? Then...

"I see you hold strong beliefs, too. Don't you, dear?" Fauna said.

"Yup." Ven nodded.

Powerful feelings and strong beliefs—they were the power to make dreams into reality.

"You also have a strong light," Flora added, still smiling.

The vivid radiance of Princess Aurora's heart must have been the strength of her belief.

"All right. Hurry, we can't stay here!"

As Ven pondered all this, Merryweather urged them to go, relieved.

"I guess so."

But just then, a frightening voice boomed out.

"Someone has released Aurora's heart. Tell me, child, was it you?"

“Maleficent!” the fairies cried. Ven turned around to see a witch in a long, black cloak.

“Only ‘cause you stole it in the first place!”

Readying his Keyblade, Ven rushed at Maleficent. However, with not a second to spare, she wrapped herself in green flames and teleported away.

She sneered down at Ven from atop the stone steps.

“A Keyblade...You must be Ventus.”

“Huh? How do you know about me...and the Keyblade?”

How would someone from this world recognize Ven before he’d even identified himself?

“My powers ensure I’d know of the key to bringing me hearts. Terra gave me a demonstration.”

Maleficent had an unnerving smile on her face as she spoke.

“Terra? He was here?”

“Why, yes. In fact, it was he who stole Princess Aurora’s heart.”

It was as though someone had reached into his chest and squeezed his heart. Ven couldn’t breathe for a moment.

Terra stole Aurora’s heart...?

“That’s a lie!” Shouting, Ven readied his Keyblade once more.

Terra would never do something like that. Not in a million years. Maleficent had to be lying.

“I was asked to leave you unharmed...but it seems I have no choice!”

Sickly fire roared up around Maleficent’s body and lashed at Ven.

Aqua landed in a location with a commanding view of a gigantic fortress beyond an eerie crag. The air felt slightly cold to the skin.

Will I see Terra again in this world? Hopefully, Ven’s here, too...

Aqua took a look around her, and a beautiful light flashed from the mysterious castle.

“...What’s that?”

Though small, its radiance was strong. *That light...*It was distant and hard to tell, but there was probably something special about it.

Perhaps there was something to be found in that keep? That was what her intuition told her. If there were trouble, Terra and Ven wouldn’t be far behind.

Aqua started walking toward the fortress.

She was concerned for both of them. Terra would probably laugh off her uneasiness, while Ven would tease her for worrying so much.

But Master Eraqus was never wrong.

Something had been wrong with Terra during the exam, no question, but when she ran into him in Cinderella’s realm he was the

Terra she knew so well. She had the feeling a day would soon come when she could report to Master Eraqus that his misgivings were baseless. So why was she still anxious?

And then there was Ven. He was still just a kid, and that had to be why Master Eraqus said to bring him back. Aqua was also concerned for him, although she completely understood why he wanted to leave. Ven would have a hard time being stuck at home alone.

Aqua's strides brought her to the great castle.

As its exterior would suggest, it was filled with an ominous air. Its ramparts were collapsed in places. And inside were not Unversed but rather ghastly monsters like anthropomorphized birds and swine. They weren't much of a threat.

Aqua defeated the beasts as she proceeded into the fortress.

At that moment, she heard a shout.

"Terra didn't steal anyone's heart! There's no way Terra would hurt somebody like that!"

What? Terra stole a heart...? And is that Ven...?

Aqua hurried toward the voice in the courtyard.

There, she found Ven in a standoff against a woman pressing her chest in pain—Maleficent.

"You don't believe me? That's unfortunate, for he agreed so easily," Maleficent declared.

"He did?"

Ven looked down and shook his head. His expression was clearly unsure. Ven was doubting Terra? That was crazy.

"Ven, don't be fooled!" Aqua cried out.

"Aqua!" A hint of joy lit in Ven's eyes as he looked back toward her.

"Terra would never do that. You know that as well as I do."

"Yeah!"

Ven nodded with a smile. She was right. Terra couldn't do something so terrible.

"Ahh...The truth can be most cruel, even amongst the closest of friends. After all, one never knows the secrets of another's heart. I'm sure you'll agree...Ventus...Aqua."

Aqua had no intention of paying heed to any of Maleficent's melodramatic blathering. Ignoring her, Aqua spoke to Ven.

"The Master sent me. Ven...let's go home." She took Ven's arm. Though they'd only been apart for a short time, Ven had grown stronger. She could tell.

"But Terra...?" Ven asked, seeming troubled.

"Terra's not ready to leave yet."

Ven lowered his head as he considered Aqua's words for a moment, then shook his head.

“...Sorry, Aqua. But I can’t go with you.” He slowly removed her hand. “It’s just...I have to find him before it’s too late!”

Ven then turned away from her and ran off.

“Ven!”

Aqua moved to pursue him as he left the room, but a voice halted her in her tracks.

“I see you, too, wield a Keyblade.”

Stopping, Aqua summoned her Keyblade and turned around. “How do you know about the Keyblade?” She held it up, bracing for a fight.

Given the way she’d spoken to Ven and the dark power swirling around her body, there was no doubting that Aqua was dealing with a foe.

“A source of power...A key that opens the hearts of men, of entire worlds...and allows one to obtain anything and everything. Such a power I find most fascinating.”

Something like a black stain crept across her chest at Maleficent’s words.

Terra couldn’t have...He didn’t really...?

She knew it was out of the question, so where were these doubts coming from?

“Yes. Now, my dear, would you like to assist me, as well?”

Maleficent’s query cleared her suspicions in an instant. Terra would never help someone who talked like this.

With a single deep breath, Aqua brought her Keyblade up again.

“Never.”

“I see. Xehanort was right. You are a most stubborn girl.” Maleficent chuckled.

“Master Xehanort? How do you...?”

Just who was this person?

Aqua took a moment to review what she knew.

She’s from another world, but she knows about Keyblades, about us, about Master Xehanort...

“It seems you need time to consider my offer. Fortunately, I have the perfect place.”

Aqua left herself vulnerable only for a moment.

A hole opened at her feet the instant Maleficent struck her staff against the floor, and the darkness swallowed Aqua as she fell.

Aqua managed to right herself in midair before landing on the stone floor. What a trap to fall for...

She briefly scolded herself, but there was no time for that.

Looking up, she took in her surroundings. This appeared to be a

dungeon.

Straining her eyes in the gloom, she found a young man in chains several yards away. His features and clothing created a very noble image.

“Who are you?” the youth asked her.

“My name is Aqua. It looks like I was caught in a trap.” As she stepped toward him, it was her turn to ask a question. “Why are you here?”

“To prevent me from breaking her evil curse. My name is Phillip. I was to meet the most beautiful girl at a cottage in the glen, but now my true love lies in an eternal slumber...and only I can break the spell.”

The earnest look in his eyes conveyed his feelings for the princess. She knew what that meant...

“You must really love her,” Aqua said.

Phillip nodded.

“Is what you said true?”

A group of fairies had appeared and the one in red, Flora, had asked Phillip the question.

“Yes. Maleficent told me.”

“Prince Phillip! It’s you!” Flora cried. It seemed the fairies and Phillip were acquainted. And the noble comportment Aqua had sensed from him appeared to be literal.

The fairy in green, Fauna, waved her wand and turned the chains binding Phillip into light.

“Now, Phillip, the road to true love may be barred by many more dangers, which you alone will have to face,” she warned.

Phillip nodded deeply, then wrapped himself in a cape.

“I’m going with you. There’s something I need to know, and Maleficent has the answer.”

Aqua took a step forward as she made her request.

“Yes, of course, dear,” Flora replied. “Now, come along. We must hurry to Aurora.”

Aqua also nodded.

“First, we need to escape the fortress. Let’s go, Prince.” Aqua summoned her Keyblade.

“Okay.”

Phillip drew his own sword and set out alongside Aqua.

Doing away with any of Maleficent’s goons they encountered in the fortress, Aqua and Phillip made it outside. The path on the cliff led them to the forest, and they rushed through the woods to the castle where Princess Aurora slept.

“So she’s asleep in this castle...”

“It’s awfully quiet...”

Aqua stopped and commented to Phillip as she took in the sight of the distant castle. Just then, black clouds began covering the blue sky.

“A forest of thorns shall be your tomb, wound ’round the castle in a bower of doom!”

As Maleficent’s voice thundered from afar, brambles wrapped around the bridge leading to the castle. It was then the witch revealed herself atop the bridge, surrounded by an aura of malevolent colored flames.

“Maleficent! What did Master Xehanort tell you?” Aqua shouted at Maleficent.

“Such a pity, child, that you don’t have Terra’s gift for obedience. Nor can you see how easy it was for him,” Maleficent said with her staff in hand.

“Terra would never do anything to help you!” Aqua replied.

Maleficent smiled thinly. “Quite the contrary. He fully embraced the darkness within himself.”

“Stop lying!”

Terra wouldn’t succumb to darkness. She wouldn’t allow herself to be deceived by these lies.

Aqua rushed at Maleficent, then lunged and brought down her Keyblade. But the new forest of thorny vines blocked her path.

“See for yourself—all the powers of hell!”

Maleficent’s characteristic blaze swallowed her as, raising both arms to the sky, she transformed into a colossal ebon dragon.

“—She’s a monster!”

Phillip took up his shield and readied his sword, and he and Aqua hacked at Maleficent in turn. The green fire from Maleficent’s draconic mouth scorched the tips of Aqua’s hair. Meanwhile, the brambles were also coming after them.

“Prince Phillip!”

“I’m fine.” With the flames in their path, they couldn’t easily get near. “Don’t worry about me. Over here!”

“Huh?”

Phillip took Aqua by the hand and protected her from a jet of fire behind his shield. “Now!”

Phillip practically threw her into the air. Spinning as she fell, Aqua poured the whole force of her descent into a powerful blow to the dragon.

Enraged, the dragon Maleficent screeched and thrashed her tail, flinging Aqua away. She barely landed safely.

“Oh no!”

Now that they had been separated, the dragon Maleficent was

going after Phillip. It was at that moment that Flora's voice rang out.

"Sword of Truth, fly swift and sure, that evil die and good endure!"

The three fairies cast a spell on Phillip together, which turned to light and enveloped his blade.

"Begone!"

The prince hurled his sword at the dragon Maleficent. The blade struck true.

She roared in a dying scream, and her emerald blaze engulfed her while the spiked vines withered away.

At long last, the wickedness was gone from this world, its only trace a small green flame. The skies cleared, and the castle returned to its former appearance.

"Hurry, Philip!" Fauna urged.

Philip nodded, and then to Aqua he said, "Thank you."

He dashed toward the castle. After watching him go, Aqua approached the tiny flicker.

"Ngh..."

A battered Maleficent appeared from it, now back in her human form.

"It's the power of true love that defeated you," Aqua proudly declared, Keyblade in hand.

Maleficent rose to her feet unsteadily. "I will not be defeated by something as insignificant as love." She refused to admit her defeat, breathing feebly.

"You don't even know the first thing about it. You're too clouded by darkness to see that there's something greater."

Replete with confidence, Aqua turned toward the castle.

Meanwhile, inside the keep, Phillip knelt beside the sleeping Princess Aurora and kissed her gently.

The princess's eyes fluttered open.

A kiss from her true love had lifted her curse.

Aqua continued, "Try all you want, but you'll never defeat a heart filled with light."

However, the green flames enwrapping Maleficent's body were beginning to wax once more.

"Perhaps...But remember one thing: as long as there is light, there will be darkness. And in time, many more will be drawn to it. Then they will all belong to me!"

With those parting words, Maleficent lifted her arms to the sky and cackled.

“No!”

Aqua moved to strike down Maleficent, but the witch vanished as her body was engulfed in an emerald blaze.

All that remained was Aqua herself.

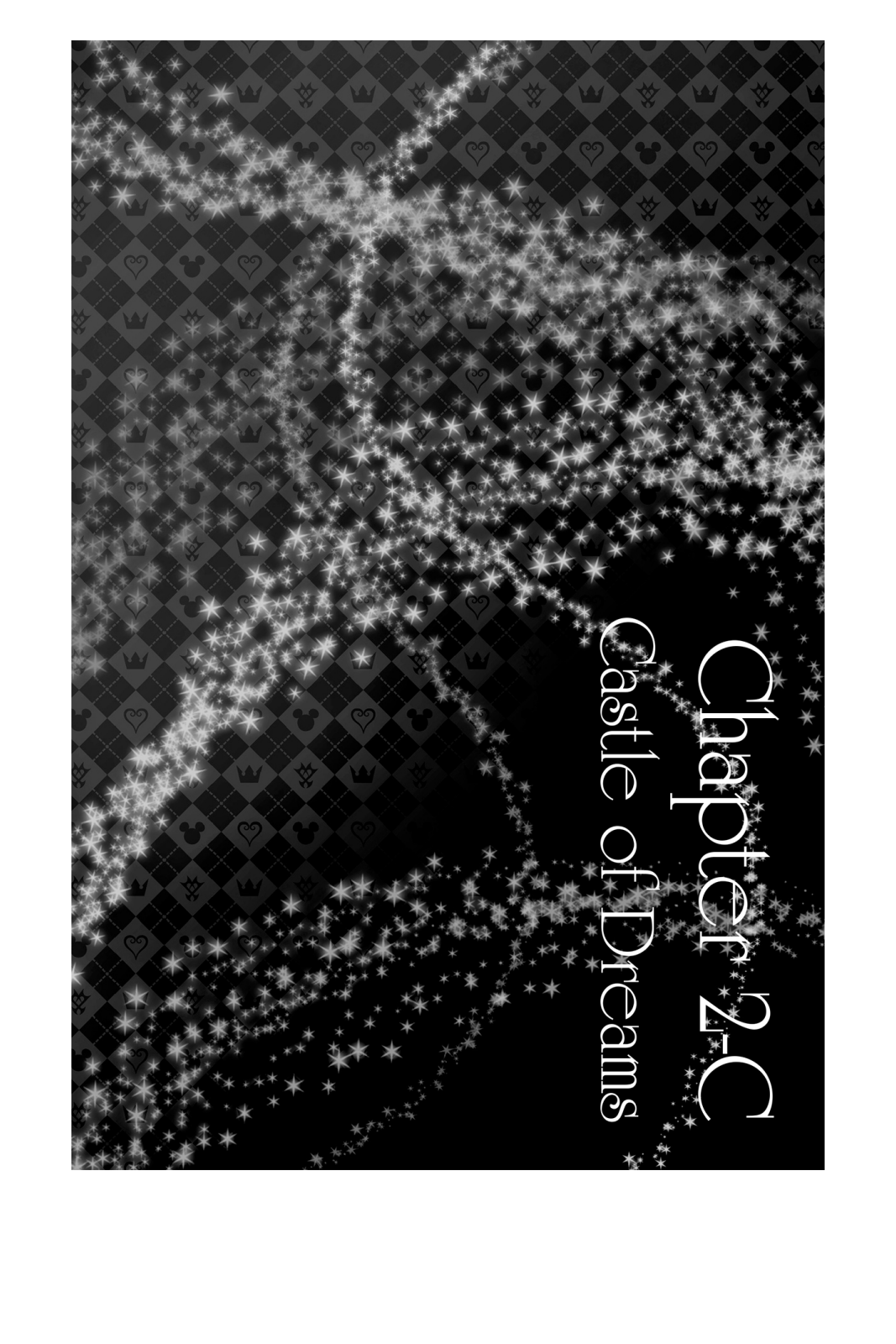
Lowering her Keyblade, she looked at the flagstones of the bridge and called the name of her dear friend.

“Terra...”

Why was she so uneasy? She had faith in him. Or she wanted to.

“You better stay strong for me.”

Aqua’s whisper was too quiet for anyone else to hear.



Chapter 2-C

Castle of Dreams

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Castle of Dreams

AFTER VEN HAD LEFT THE DWARF WOODLANDS, but before he set down in the Enchanted Dominion, he was traveling through the Lanes Between atop his Keyblade glider.

“He’s leaving you behind. And by the time you catch up...he’ll be a different person.”

The prediction of the boy whose name he didn’t know ran through the back of his mind.

Terra wouldn’t change. It had to be some sort of mistake. He just wanted to see Terra as soon as possible so he could be totally sure.

Ven saw a world with a beautiful castle ahead. What was Terra searching for on his journey through all these worlds?

“It’s okay. Terra’s not gonna be anyone else,” Ven whispered to reassure himself, then spurred his Keyblade on toward the world before him.

As for where he landed...

“What is going on?” Ven muttered as he surveyed the area.

He didn’t have a clue how he got *here*.

What is this place?

No, he knew where he was, more or less. This was that new world with the beautiful castle, at least as far as he could tell. But he couldn’t see anything like a castle or figure out where he was relative to it. There were iron bars all around him, like he’d been trapped in some kind of cage, and when he peered through, he couldn’t believe what was happening. What kind of world was this?

Ven’s gaze flicked upward as he grabbed the bars and hollered the one thing he did understand: “Somebody tell me how I got so *small!!*”

The name of this world was the Castle of Dreams.

From the tiny window of her tiny room in the great mansion, a girl let out a heavy sigh and gazed wistfully at a big, beautiful castle. Her hair

was a lovely shade of blond, and her features were strong and determined. However, her hair was tied in back in a simple style, just to keep it out of the way, and the clothing she wore was extremely plain.

As she breathed another great sigh, she heard a voice calling out to her, though it was so small it would be inaudible to anyone who wasn't listening closely.

"Cinderella! Cinderella! Come on! Gotta hurry! Gotta hurry!"

A brown mouse wearing a red cap and orange clothes appeared before the girl called Cinderella.

"What's the matter, Jaq? You're awfully excited," Cinderella said kindly to the mouse.

"Somebody new in the house! Somebody I never saw before," Jaq rapidly explained, scrambling atop Cinderella's knee.

"A new friend? Where is he?"

"In a trap! Down the stairs!"

"Oh no!"

Placing Jaq on the floor, Cinderella leaped to her feet and rushed from the room. The little mouse scurried into a hole in the wall.

Ven had no idea what to do inside the cage. He'd thought he was coming to a world with a gorgeous castle, so how did he end up behind bars? It was possible his cage was inside the castle, but outside it he saw a sofa for giants.

At this point, it didn't matter whether this world was just big or he'd been shrunk; Ven just wanted out of here.

As he gave a heavy sigh, he heard a door click open, alerting him that someone was coming this way. It was a girl. She was beautiful, if very, very large.

Picking up Ven's cage, she peered in quietly.

"Don't be afraid," she said, opening the lid. "Oh! How interesting...I've never seen a mouse like you before."

"Mouse?"

I'm a mouse? So, is this cage...a mousetrap?

"Jaq, you better explain things to him."

The girl set the cage on the floor, and a mouse marched in through the open entrance.

"Now, now, now. Look, little guy. Take it easy. Nothing to worry about. We like you. Cinderella likes you, too. She's nice, very nice," the mouse cheerfully explained. It sounded like the girl's name was Cinderella.

"Come on now. Zugk-zugk."

The mouse began walking. As Ven followed, he stopped outside

the cage and turned back to Ven. "My name's Jaq."

"I'm Ventus. Call me Ven."

It was the first time he'd ever introduced himself to a mouse.

"Okay, Ven. Need something? Ask Jaq!"

This rosy-nosed mouse in his red cap and orange shirt didn't seem like a bad guy.

Cinderella observed the two of them with a gentle expression.

"Cinderella!"

Just then, a woman's voice called her from far away.

"Oh well, time to get to my chores. I'll see you in a little while, Ven," Cinderella said, then stood up and left the room. She appeared to be in a hurry.

"Wow, I guess she's got her hands full," Ven commented.

Jaq shook his head dramatically. "Yep, work, work, work! Stepmother keeps Cinderella busy all day!" He seemed upset.

"She didn't seem to mind much, though."

Ven was just calling it like he saw it. Cinderella didn't act angry when she was called, and she had left the room right away.

"No, not Cinderella. She works hard. She's got a dream—a big dream. The dream's gonna come true!"

A dream that would come true someday—Ven remembered something Terra once said long ago.

"Being a Keyblade Master is all I've dreamed about."

Oh yeah, he had to find Terra.

"That sounds like somebody I know. Hey, maybe you can help me find him! His name's Terra. You seen him?" Ven asked Jaq.

"No. I never saw Terra before."

"Oh, well. It was worth a shot." He'd picked up Terra's trail in Snow White's world, but now...

"Come on. Follow me. You gotta see the house."

Jaq began walking toward a small hole in a corner of the room. Ven followed him inside and found himself in the dingy, dusty space behind the wall.

"You live here?"

"No, no, much nicer. Not perfect, but okay," Jaq said as he walked.

"What do you mean?"

"Cinderella stays in the attic. But her stepsisters have pretty rooms!"

The slightly resentful Jaq jumped onto a fork stuck into the wall. The fork acted as a springboard, launching Jaq high up into the air to land on a beam jutting from the wall. Ven followed his lead.

"Why is that?"

“Because Cinderella’s stepmother is mean, very mean! All Lady Tremaine’s fault!”

Jaq plunged on ahead, appearing very angered.

“She’s being mistreated...Can’t you help her?”

“Jaq helps all the time! This way.”

Ven hurried after Jaq through another hole in the corner of the wall. On the other side was a much, much smaller room than the one with the mousetrap.

Where the previous room had nice wallpaper and carpeting, this one had nothing but the bare planks of its walls and floor. It was tidier, but that was it.

“Let’s wait here for Cinderella to come back.”

Jaq hopped atop a chair and sat himself beside the window. Ven plopped down next to the mouse.

A splendid castle rose in the distance beyond the window. *Was that the castle I saw from the Lanes Between?*

“What’s that?” Ven asked Jaq.

“That’s the palace—the king’s palace. There’s going to be a big ball there tonight.”

If every girl in the land was going, then...

“Is Cinderella going?”

“I don’t know...”

Just as Jaq was about to explain, the door opened. Ven turned around to see Cinderella, apparently finished with her chores.

“Hello, you two. Have you become friends already?”

Cinderella came up to the windowsill and smiled at them.

“Of course!” Ven replied, exchanging a glance with Jaq and nodding his agreement. He hadn’t been able to make any friends in the last world he visited, but Ven felt that Jaq and he had already reached that point. Things hadn’t worked out so great with the dwarfs, and Snow White was...a maybe...?

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” Cinderella said. She picked up a half-finished dress from a corner of the room and stuck it with marking pins, humming a tune.

“You sure look happy, Cinderella,” Ven remarked.

She turned back with a smile. “Mm, I’m going to the royal ball tonight. I guess dreams really do come true.”

Cinderella clasped her hands together over her chest with a rapt smile on her face, but just then, another call came.

“Cinderella!”

She turned to the door, looking the tiniest bit sad.

“My dress will have to wait.”

“Cinderella!”

“Cinderella!”

Now two new voices were shouting for her.

"All right, all right, I'm coming!" Cinderella replied as she left the room.

Jaq gave a slight shake of his head as he watched her go. "Poor Cinderella. She's not going to the ball."

"Why not?"

"You'll see. They'll keep her busy. Work, work, work. She'll never get her dress done."

So she needed a dress for the ball...Lady Tremaine sounded awful. That was just mean-spirited.

"Say, I got an idea!" Jaq abruptly hopped up with a shout. "Ven, will you help me?"

"With what?" Ven folded his arms.

"Fixing Cinderella's dress for the ball."

"How? I've never made a dress before." Ven wanted to do something for Cinderella, but he wasn't sure what he *could* do.

"Don't worry. Just get the pieces for the dress. I'll take care of the stitchery."

"Okay. Let's do it." Ven finally smiled, happy to find a way to help Cinderella. "What do I need to find?"

"Let's scrounge up some white lace, white buttons, white ribbon, pink cloth, and pink thread."

"Roger!"

Ven jumped down from the window frame. He was pretty sure he could scrounge up those materials in that cluttered room.

"Ven! Be careful of Lucifer!" Jaq called out.

"Lucifer?"

Ven stopped and turned back to Jaq.

"Lucifer is a cat! He's mean...sneaky...He'll jump at you, bite at you!"

"Gotcha!"

Ven dashed into the mousehole.

Passing behind the wall, Ven ran to the room from earlier. Luckily, there was no sign of any cats.

He clambered onto a box and pulled down some white ribbon, then grabbed some white buttons from a table with a clock on it. The buttons were so big Ven could barely manage to carry them, but he finally plunked them down atop the pink cloth on the floor along with the white ribbon. All he needed now were lace and pink thread.

Ven spotted the lace on the sofa, then found the pink thread on the bookshelf. That made everything Jaq asked him for. Placing the last two items on the pink cloth, Ven folded it into four sections and

hefted it onto his back.

“I wonder if it’ll fit through that hole...”

It was hard being small. If Ven were normal size, finding and carrying everything would’ve been so much easier.

“Ack!”

When he tried to walk into the mousehold, the bundle got caught and pulled him back onto his rump.

“Guess that’s not gonna work...”

Setting the bundle down, he squeezed it into the hole first, then went through himself afterward.

“You’re back!”

Jaq came running up when Ven returned to the room carrying the big load.

“Did you get everything?”

“You bet I did!”

Ven lowered the bundle and undid the pink cloth, and the materials Jaq asked for came spilling out.

“Perfect, Ven! It just needs a pretty pearl. You can do it. We don’t have much time, so I’ll be right behind you.”

“Leave it to me!” Ven replied, then hurried through the wall to the previous room.

It was swarming with Unversed. Summoning his Keyblade into his hand, Ven rushed toward them. Jaq said they were running out of time. No need to finish them all here. After all...

“You know what they say—discretion is the better part of valor!” Ven cried.

He leaped down from the wall and dashed into the big chamber.

“Whoa!”

...And skidded to a halt again. In the center of the room was a large cat—Lucifer. The feline was snoring quietly—a small consolation, perhaps. And the pearls lay scattered right in front of him.

“Don’t wake up...”

Approaching Lucifer ever so stealthily, Ven lifted up a pearl about the same size as his head. But as he tried to quietly slip away, Lucifer sensed Ven tiptoeing behind him and raised his paw to play with his new prey.

“Look out!”

Suddenly, Ven heard Jaq’s voice, and a ball of yarn bonked Lucifer on the head.

“Rreowr!”

Jaq hurled ball after ball of yarn from atop a shelf while Lucifer

ran around the room yowling and trying to avoid them.

“Get away, now!” Jaq called.

Ven took off with the pearl in his arms. However, the galloping cat slammed into the shelves, knocking Jaq off balance and sending him tumbling to the floor.

“Owow...”

“Grrrowr!”

Lucifer made to pounce on Jaq, who was cradling his head. Ven swiftly darted in between them.

“Time to play, cat!”

“Ven!”

Ven handed Jaq the pearl. “Take it, Jaq! I’ll hold him off. Run!”

“Okay!” Jaq ran off with the pearl in his arms.

“All right, bring it on!”

At Ven’s call, Lucifer sprang up on to the shelves. As the boy moved to chase him down, the cat jumped.

“Whoa!”

Ven was squashed under Lucifer’s massive body. When he swung his Keyblade to get the cat off of him, Lucifer bounded away yet again, this time onto the sofa.

He’s gonna squish me again—!

Springing backward in the nick of time, Ven hopped aboard the cat’s back when he landed. The animal couldn’t escape this way, and Ven wouldn’t get flattened, either. Though Lucifer darted around doing his best to shake him off, Ven grabbed onto the fur of the cat’s back and hunkered down. When Lucifer finally stopped, Ven brought his Keyblade down onto the crown of the cat’s head and jumped down from his back.

“Rrrrrrar!”

Lucifer let out a screech and retreated. Jaq came running up as Ven caught his breath.

“Oh, that’s a big ‘thank you.’”

“No thanks needed.” Ven would’ve been in real trouble if it weren’t for Jaq’s help. “You saved me before, so I saved you. That’s what friends do, right?”

Jaq grinned at Ven’s words. “Yep! Ven and Jaq are good friends!”

“Now, let’s get that dress finished.”

Ven and Jaq hustled back to Cinderella’s room together.

Back in her attic room, Cinderella gazed absentmindedly through the window. She could see the castle glittering off in the distance.

“Oh, well...What’s a royal ball? After all, I suppose it would be frightfully dull, and boring, and completely...completely wonderful.”

Cinderella sighed wearily. Her dress wouldn't be done in time. She'd had so much faith in her dream—but it was impossible after all.

"Cinderella!"

A voice called out for her. When she turned around, the partition opened, revealing a pink dress.

"Is that my dress?"

"Yes. It's a present from us. Now you have a dress for the ball."

Ven and Jaq watched Cinderella proudly from in front of the gown. Kneeling, Cinderella took each one in hand and leaned in.

"Why, it's...it's such a surprise..."

"Hurry! Time to go, Cinderella!"

"Oh, thank you," she said, smiling.

"I wonder if Cinderella's dream will come true..."

Ven was gazing vacantly out the window at the castle with Jaq. Cinderella had put on her dress and left just moments ago.

"I hope so. What are your dreams, Ven?"

"Huh? I wonder..."

Ven fell into thought at Jaq's question.

"Being a Keyblade Master is all I've dreamed about."

Terra had said that once. Giggling, Aqua had replied:

"Well, you're not the only one."

And Terra had agreed.

"I know. You, me, and Ven all share the same dream."

Back then, Ven hadn't really understood what Terra was saying. He'd never spared a thought for his own dreams before. Or since. But...

"Funny...I'd never really thought about it—at least until you asked me. My dream is to become a Keyblade Master." Ven gripped his Keyblade in his hand.

"I hope your dream comes true, too."

"I just need to keep on believing, right?"

"Right."

The two of them gazed at the castle beyond the window once more. The ball would be in full swing right about now.

"I'd better be going." Ven stood up. "Let's catch up again. We're friends now, after all."

"Yeah!" Jaq agreed.

Nodding at the little mouse, Ven put this world behind him.

Cinderella hurried down the staircase of the mansion wearing the dress that Ven and Jaq had made. Her stepmother, Lady Tremaine, and her two stepsisters—Anastasia and Drizella—were about to leave the manor.

“Wait! Please wait for me! I have a dress!” she called, beaming at the three of them.

“I don’t want to go with her!” Anastasia complained to Lady Tremaine as Cinderella caught her breath.

“Girls, please. After all, we did make a bargain—didn’t we, Cinderella? You did your chores, and you made your dress. And I never go back on my word...How very clever. These beads...they give it just the right touch. Don’t you think so, Drizella?”

Lady Tremaine seemed to be praising her, and then Drizella marched briskly up to Cinderella, her eyes locked on the pearls on Cinderella’s chest. “No, I don’t! I think she’s—Why, you little thief!” she screeched. “They’re *my* beads! Give them here! ” She ripped the pearls from the dress.

“Please, stop!” Cinderella cried out, but then Anastasia took hold of the ribbon and pulled.

“And look, that’s my sash!”

“This is my lace!”

Her two stepsisters took turns tearing off all the ornamentation sewn onto the dress until the beautiful garment was shredded. Satisfied at Cinderella’s miserable condition, Lady Tremaine finally spoke up. “Girls, girls. That’s quite enough. Hurry along now, both of you.”

With that, Cinderella’s elder stepsisters walked away from her and left the mansion.

“Good night,” said Lady Tremaine with finality, and she closed the door.

As Cinderella stood abandoned, tears began to spill from her eyes. She had been so sure her dream would come true if she only believed...

She dashed from the rear entrance of the manor to the fountain that reminded her of her father.

Cinderella collapsed onto the rim of the fountain and quietly sobbed.

Terra walked through a dusky forest. Still no sign of that big castle he’d spotted from the Lanes Between, surprisingly. What he came upon instead was a crying girl. Approaching her gingerly, Terra spoke to her.

“Is something wrong?”

“It’s just that my friends made me the most beautiful dress, but my stepmother and stepsisters ruined it. And I was so looking forward to the ball,” the girl replied, still weeping.

Unsure of how to comfort a crying girl, Terra hesitated, then slowly said, “Darkness always finds a way into a wounded heart. You have to be strong. Strength of heart will carry you through the hardest of trials.”

“But I...” Her voice trembled, and the girl, Cinderella, burst into tears again. How could he help her cheer up...?

Terra was about to try speaking to her again when glimmering particles of light began to dance around them.

“Strength of heart is important, yes, but that’s not all you need.”

Terra spun around at the voice, but found no one.

“There’s nothing left to believe in...Nothing.”

“Nothing, my dear? Oh, now, you don’t really mean that.”

A white-haired woman in a periwinkle robe appeared before Cinderella where she lay weeping.

“Oh, but I do. It’s just no use.”

“Nonsense, child! If you’d lost all your faith, I couldn’t be here—and here I am!” said the elderly woman, Cinderella’s Fairy Godmother, taking her by the hand and helping her to her feet. The Fairy Godmother calmly cupped Cinderella’s cheeks with both hands and continued. “Oh, come now, dry those tears. You can’t go to the ball looking like that.”

“The ball? Oh, but I’m not—”

Cinderella looked at the tatters of her dress and lowered her head.

“Of course you are. But we have to hurry. Because even miracles take a little time. Now, what were those magic words? Oh yes! Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo!”

When the Fairy Godmother waved her white magic wand, light sprang from the tip and onto one of the pumpkins in the garden. The pumpkin rolled up to Cinderella, and the light engulfed it to transform it into a splendid horse-drawn carriage.

“Oh...!” Cinderella gasped in surprise.

The Fairy Godmother waved her wand once more, toward the girl herself. The sparkling glow wrapped around Cinderella’s body and became a gorgeous white ballgown.

“It’s a beautiful dress. Why...it’s like a dream come true!” Cinderella twirled around, positively bursting with joy.

“Yes, my child, but like all dreams...Well, I’m afraid this can’t last forever. You’ll have only till midnight, and then, on the stroke of twelve, the spell will be broken, and everything will be as it was before.”

“Yes, I understand.”

With a nod, Cinderella embraced her Fairy Godmother. She then lifted the skirt of her dress and climbed into the carriage.

The beautiful girl was nearly glowing herself. A heart of exceptional light...Could she be one of the princesses of heart? Or had the woman's spell only allowed him to sense her radiance now?

A glimmering castle sat austere before them as they saw off Cinderella, who waved her hand gracefully from the carriage. Terra turned back and asked the Fairy Godmother, "What did you do? I can hardly tell she's the same person."

"Who are you?" the Fairy Godmother asked him back.

"Terra."

After he gave his name, the Fairy Godmother's face softened before she replied, "Terra, in your heart, do you believe that dreams can come true?"

Of course he believed dreams could come true. But he also believed in the teachings of Master Eraqus.

He told it to her straight out. "I do. But I also believe you have to make an effort to make them come true."

"Yes, of course. But sometimes just believing in dreams is easier said than done. Cinderella believes her dreams can come true. I wanted her to see that she is right."

The Fairy Godmother's words turned Terra's attention toward the castle in the distance.

So that's what made her shine—faith in her heart that anything is possible.

Come to think of it, Terra's dream hadn't come true. He'd failed to become a Keyblade Master, although Master Eraqus had said his status might be reconsidered if he did well here.

Would a man who stole Princess Aurora's heart receive a passing grade? He wasn't so sure.

People had taught him about strength of heart, the importance of believing in dreams, and the efforts needed to realize those dreams, yet he couldn't shake his uncertainty. He had failed to master his darkness because he was weak.

Do I really have the faith to make my dream come true?

Terra turned back to the Fairy Godmother and asked, "Where did she go?"

"To the royal ball at the palace. Go. And when you see her dancing, you'll know that she believes, and that will help you to believe, too."

She would help him believe...

Nodding at the Fairy Godmother's words, Terra set off walking.

Terra walked through the forest and made for the castle. Unversed darted here and there around its vestibule, but Terra cleaned them up and climbed the steps to the great foyer. There he found several more Unversed—and a frightened Cinderella among them.

“Not here, too!” Leaping with Keyblade in hand, Terra disposed of the Unversed.

“I’ve met you before...” Cinderella raised her terrified face.

The Unversed chose that moment to hem in Terra and Cinderella again. Placing himself in front of Cinderella to protect her, Terra did away with this fresh batch. He sensed even greater evil deeper within—Cinderella couldn’t enter the castle now, not like this.

“I’ll take care of them. You wait right here.”

“Please, may I go with you? I so want to get to the ball,” said Cinderella with a smile, but her words were full of unshakable determination.

“All right. But stay behind me, or you’ll get hurt.”

“I will.” Cinderella nodded firmly.

“...You’re not worried?” The words came out unbidden.

Cinderella smiled kindly and said, “Didn’t you tell me it was important to stay strong?”

“I guess I did.”

Terra nodded and took another look at Cinderella.

Maybe real strength wasn’t about you, but about the strength of your wish.

“So...you ready?”

“Yes.”

Holding his Keyblade, Terra entered the castle with Cinderella. As they made their way along the red-carpeted corridor, the Unversed attacked them in waves. Terra protected Cinderella as he dispatched them.

Whenever Cinderella’s white dress fluttered up, he could see her beautiful slippers. Those high heels would be hard to move fast in.

But they’d never get anywhere at this rate.

Taking Cinderella’s hand so that she didn’t trip, Terra said, “We have to run.”

The two of them then sprinted the rest of the way to the great hall.

Cinderella flashed him a breathless smile. “Oh, thank you. Um...” She tilted her head with a slightly troubled expression.

“Terra.”

Cinderella’s smile brightened when Terra caught on and gave his own name. “Thank you, Terra.”

Nodding in reply, Terra gestured toward the center of the hall, urging her onward. His job escorting her was done.

Cinderella held her skirt and walked gracefully to the hall. A young man—perhaps Prince Charming himself—noticed her and took her by the hand.

At a signal from a bearded man in a corner of the hall—the Grand Duke—a waltz began to play, and Cinderella and the prince started their dance.

“Maybe just believing is enough,” Terra mused, struck by Cinderella’s beauty and joy as she danced.

Meanwhile, as Cinderella basked in her dream, a trio of women whispered to one another off to the side.

“But who is she, Mother?”

“Do we know her?”

The women—Cinderella’s stepsisters, Anastasia and Drizella—were watching Cinderella and the prince dance with annoyance.

“Well, the prince certainly seems to. I’ve never seen her before.”

“Nor I. But she certainly is—Wait! There is something familiar about her...”

Next to the conversing sisters, Lady Tremaine glowered at Cinderella. An extraordinarily disquieting air hung about them.

That was when Terra spotted suspicious shadows on the balcony above the hall—Unversed.

Here, too? But why? At this rate, Cinderella’s dream of the ball would be ruined.

As Terra moved toward the balcony with his Keyblade in hand, an enormous Unversed, the Symphony Master, appeared in the ballroom where Cinderella danced.

“What?!”

The prince stood shielding Cinderella and faced down the Symphony Master.

“Guards! Guards! Agh! Where did they go?!” shouted the Grand Duke.

“I’ll take care of this!” Terra declared to Cinderella and the prince, and charged in.

“We can trust him,” Cinderella assured the prince as he led her away by the hand.

The great Unversed attacked Terra, accompanied by three large musical instruments. He had to smash those before he went after the main body...

One by one, Terra demolished the instruments and their unpleasant music. Like a conductor, the Symphony Master waved its arms to direct them, but Terra knocked away their attacks with his Keyblade and silenced all three. All that remained was the Unversed itself.

Terra caught his breath and then leaped as high as he could. The

blow was packing all the force he had, and the Symphony Master's head drooped. Terra took advantage of the opening to hit it as hard and as fast as he could, and the Unversed was no more.

"Okay—that should do it."

The Grand Duke rushed up to Terra after he dismissed his Keyblade. "Thank you. You've saved us all." Despite his thanks, the Grand Duke's shoulders slumped in disappointment. "The guests were just starting to enjoy themselves..."

"Well, don't give up just yet." Paying no heed to the Grand Duke's lament, Terra peered farther into the hall. The Grand Duke turned around, following his lead. There the prince and Cinderella were gazing into each other's eyes with rapt attention.

"Tell me something: Have you always had a problem around here with those monsters?" Terra asked.

The Grand Duke crossed his arms. "No. I believe...they began to appear shortly after a boy in a mask arrived in our kingdom. Those who saw him said the monsters obeyed his every command." His expression darkened.

"A boy in a mask? Do you know where he is now?" Terra pressed.

This was the first he'd heard anything about a boy in a mask. Were the Unversed linked somehow to this masked youth? Or maybe to Master Xehanort?

"Well...No, I don't believe anyone has seen him since then."

"I see..."

As Terra pondered, a great bell rang.

"Oh...My goodness! It's midnight!" Cinderella pulled herself away from the prince in a panic. Now that she mentioned it, midnight was when the spell was supposed to come undone.

"Yes, so it is, but why—?"

Prince Charming tried to take her hand and stop her, but Cinderella hurried away. After a few steps, she turned around reluctantly. "Good-bye."

She then ran off again.

"Wait! Come back! Please come back!"

The prince chased after Cinderella, and the Grand Duke chased him in turn.

"Mademoiselle! Senorita! Wait!"

Cinderella ran through the corridor and down the stairway leading to the vestibule.

One of her slippers came off on the stairway, but Cinderella didn't care, as long as the magic hadn't worn off, and hurried on toward the carriage.

The Grand Duke picked up the slipper and joined the prince in watching her go. Both of them were stunned.

Terra had no intention of pursuing this any further. Cinderella possessed the strength to believe in her dream. He was sure she would be fine if she had that much fortitude.

When Terra walked down the corridor, relieved and ready to go, he spotted someone entering the castle and called out her name in surprise.

“Aqua!”

She looked up. Somehow, it felt like a very long time since they’d seen each other.

“Terra!”

She walked up to him. Without giving him time to enjoy their reunion, she told him something surprising: “Terra...Ven ran away from home.”

It was the first he’d heard of Ven setting off on a journey.

“I think he left to go find you. Do you have any idea why?” she asked.

Terra shook his head quietly. *What could have made Ven leave? Why would he come after me?* He reflected on what had happened when he set out.

“Actually...Just before I left, he tried to tell me something. I should’ve listened to what he had to say.”

“Oh...”

Ven had definitely wanted to say something back then, but Terra had been too focused on other things to listen.

Aqua’s expression was gloomy; she was probably worried sick about Ven. But she quickly rallied herself, lifted her face, and said, “So...did you manage to locate Master Xehanort?”

“No, but it seems he’s looking for pure hearts filled with light.”

Terra passed the information along to Aqua, omitting what he’d done to Princess Aurora. Maybe his inability to tell her was just his own weakness.

He’d be fine as long as he had the strength to believe in his dreams, though.

Terra had faith in himself, in Ven on his journey, and in Aqua, too.

As he walked to the exit, he said, “All I can tell you is that his search hasn’t taken him here.”

“All right. I’ll stay and see if I can find more clues.”

“Okay. The prince is in the ballroom ahead. He might have some answers.”

“Thanks.”

Terra could tell that Aqua had started on her way again behind him. Terra stopped, then looked back and called out to her.

“Aqua.”

She turned around.

“You still have the same dream?”

For just a moment, a quizzical expression appeared on Aqua’s face before she nodded.

“Well...Yes.”

My dream—was really our dream. It wasn’t just mine. And that was why Terra wanted to express how he was feeling right then to Aqua.

“There’s this girl here—her name is Cinderella. She made me realize how powerful it is just to believe. No matter how impossible things seem, a powerful enough dream will always be enough to light the darkness.”

Aqua smiled at Terra and nodded. “I’m glad to hear you say that.”

I’ll be okay. I’m sure of it.

Terra started walking.

There really was no chance of Terra falling to darkness.

Aqua nodded once as she watched him leave. This was the first world she’d landed on after setting out from the Land of Departure, and it was fortunate she’d run into him here. She was able to both tell him about Ven and confirm that he was carrying out his mission.

The weakness of her own beliefs had led her to doubt Terra. Aqua was sure the problem was not with Terra, but in the frailty of her heart. She had to become stronger...

Aqua’s feet carried her into the great ballroom, where she passed by three women standing near the wall.

The unusual air around them caused her breath to catch in her throat—it was murky and stagnant. Aqua asked the bearded man who had come into the ballroom after her about the women.

“Who are those ladies?”

“Oh, er, if I recall completely, that is Lady Tremaine, and those are her daughters.”

Aqua turned back and eyed the women from behind. They didn’t even seem human—but something more malicious. Aqua began to walk after them, but then she was stopped.

“You came back!”

Aqua turned around at the voice to find a dignified youth dressed in white. Seeing Aqua’s face, his expression fell.

“My apologies, I was mistaken.”

The bearded man who had told her the name of Lady Tremaine—the Grand Duke—appeared with a small cushion bearing an even smaller slipper for a dainty foot.

“Your Highness, I found this on the palace stairs.”

“A glass slipper?”

This young man was apparently the prince of this kingdom. He took the slipper in hand and gave it a long look.

“One dropped by a lovely young lady, and I’ll search far and wide to find the maiden to whom this belongs,” said the Grand Duke.

“You will?!” The prince’s face brightened. It seemed he sought the owner of this glass slipper.

“Of course, Your Highness. After all, you have finally found someone whom you wish to marry. Upon hearing that happy news, your father, the king, has decreed that a quest shall begin immediately throughout the kingdom. And I will start with the closest residence—that of Lady Tremaine.”

The Grand Duke marched from the hall with the glass slipper held out before him.

Aqua watched him go, thinking for a moment. Something was very wrong with Lady Tremaine and her daughters. She left the hall and went after the Grand Duke’s carriage.

The Grand Duke knocked on the door of a mansion located quite close to the castle.

“You honor our humble home, my lord.” Lady Tremaine opened the door.

“Ahem. Quite so.”

“May I present my daughters, Drizella and Anastasia.” The lady invited the Grand Duke inside and closed the door.

Aqua had followed the Grand Duke all the way here, and she gazed up at the mansion, trying to get a hint of what lay beyond its walls.

A sinister air hung over the entire estate—an incontrovertibly negative presence. Tightening her grip on her Keyblade, Aqua stepped forward.

“Wait!” a voice suddenly called, and she turned back.

There stood an elderly woman wearing light purple in an aura of light. Her expression was both friendly and gentle. “It’s dangerous to fight the darkness with light, my dear,” she warned.

Aqua approached her. “Who are you?”

“Cinderella’s Fairy Godmother. I appear to those who believe that dreams come true.”

At the introduction of the woman, Aqua didn’t quite understand what the Fairy Godmother was getting at, though. *Isn’t light supposed to vanquish the darkness?* she wondered, and then asked the question aloud. “Then I am honored. But why would you advise me not to fight darkness with light?”

The Fairy Godmother replied, gentle but admonishing. “Strong

rays of sun create dark shadows. Sadly, Lady Tremaine and both her daughters are jealous of Cinderella's charm and beauty, qualities that appear to you as 'light.' Jealousy is darkness. Light and dark go hand in hand. You can't have one without the other."

Master Eraqus had never taught them any of that.

Darkness was darkness, and light was light. Darkness *did* lurk in everyone's heart, but it couldn't coexist with light. It couldn't be allowed to exist at all, the Master had taught them. But this was nothing like what she'd learned.

Light and darkness are closely linked...? I don't understand.

After thinking for a moment, Aqua asked the Fairy Godmother, "Then what should I do?"

"It's quite simple, dear. One of Cinderella's friends is trying very hard to keep her light from fading. I want you to join little Jaq and help him."

It seemed like a good idea to heed the words of the Fairy Godmother here. Furthermore, Aqua didn't think the kindly old woman was wrong. That didn't mean she believed Master Eraqus's teachings were mistaken—just that she was beginning to consider that light and darkness were more complex than she thought.

"I can do that." Aqua nodded.

"You'll need a bit of my magic to help Jaq."

"If you would, then, please."

The Fairy Godmother smiled happily at Aqua's straightforward compliance, then twirled her magic wand.

"Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo!"

The sparkles from her wand swirled around Aqua, then shrank into a small orb of light and flew to the second floor of the house.

A mouse wearing an orange shirt was dragging a big key across the middle of the room.

Was this mouse Jaq?

Aqua approached and spoke to him.

"Are you okay?"

Still tugging the key along, Jaq replied without even turning in Aqua's direction. "Cinderella's stepmother locked her in her room. I've gotta let her out! I've gotta save Cinderella!"

"Let me help you."

"Oh, thank you."

Jaq finally turned back to Aqua as she came near.

"Ooh! That's like Ven's!" Jaq exclaimed in surprise. Maybe he knew of Keyblades? "Did you ever meet Ven?" he asked in excitement.

"I'm Aqua, but...tell me how you know about Ven."

“We’re friends—good friends. Ven helped me fix Cinderella’s dress.”

So Ven had been to this world...Slightly relieved, Aqua asked Jaq a question.

“And where is he now?”

“He’s looking for a friend—another friend.”

“I see...”

Why exactly was Ven searching for Terra?

Just then, they heard loud voices from the first floor.

“I can’t understand why. It always fit perfectly before.”

“Quite enough of this. The next young lady, please...” The Grand Duke responded with undisguised irritation at the woman’s excuse.

“Oh no. Hear that?! We’ve gotta hurry! Cinderella’s gotta try that slipper. Come on, come on, hurry!”

Jaq began dragging the key again. When Aqua moved to help, Unversed appeared to block Jaq’s path.

“Ah! No, no, no! We’ve gotta hurry!” Jaq pleaded, but, with no reason to comply, more and more Unversed showed up to hem him in.

“It’s all right. Leave this to me. Jaq, don’t lose that key!”

Keyblade in hand, Aqua dashed into the midst of the Unversed.

Why would Unversed manifest here? Maybe the malevolence of Lady Tremaine and her daughters was connected to the negative presence in some way.

Aqua decimated the Unversed one after the other.

“Hurry, Jaq!”

Heartened by Aqua’s call, the little mouse gave it his all. One Unversed leaped at him.

“Wah!” Jaq clutched at his head, and Aqua leaped in front of him to defeat the Unversed. Not a moment too soon.

“W-wow.”

“Enough about me, hurry!”

“Okay! Thanks, Aqua!”

After watching Jaq rush off to a hole in the wall with the key, Aqua planted herself in front of the remaining Unversed.

“All right, come and get me.”

They all lunged in unison, but Aqua’s graceful fighting style made short work of them.

Once the last Unversed had fallen, Aqua uneasily took a peek down at the first floor from the staircase. Both Anastasia and Drizella had finished trying the glass slipper.

“You’re the only ladies here?”

“There’s no one else, Your Grace,” Lady Tremaine replied to the

Grand Duke's question.

"Come on...Hurry, Jaq!"

With a big sigh, the Grand Duke prepared to leave the manor. *Oh no! If I don't do something, they won't make it in time!*

As Aqua instinctively stepped forward, the spell wore off. In an instant, she was big again, and she promptly tumbled into the first-floor hall.

"Ow, ow, ow—huh?"

Lady Tremaine, her two daughters, and the Grand Duke all stared at Aqua.

What do I do now? I should buy some time. Oh!

"Uh, would it be all right if...I tried on the glass slipper?" And that was what the flustered Aqua came up with.

"Hmm...I met you at the palace. Unfortunately, you are not the young lady the prince is looking for."

"But I am a girl. I should at least be given a chance to try it on."

The slipper obviously wouldn't fit, but Aqua pressed her case all the same.

"Who are you? What are you doing in my house?" Lady Tremaine fixed Aqua with a baleful look.

"She's probably here to rob us!"

"Mother, do something!"

Her two daughters loudly complained.

"That girl does not live here. I have only two daughters. I believe we're finished here, Your Grace," Lady Tremaine said to the Grand Duke, but it seemed he had something on his mind.

"Regardless, she means no harm. Here you are, my dear."

Jaq! Hurry! Aqua silently pleaded, and that was when it happened.

"Your Grace...Please wait. May I try it on?" Cinderella had finally appeared at the top of the stairs.

However, Lady Tremaine persisted in her attempts to stop the Grand Duke.

"Pay no attention to her. She's just an imaginative child."

But the Grand Duke shook his head. "Madam, my orders were every maiden."

"You should let her go first."

Aqua offered Cinderella her hand and led her to the chair.

"Thank you."

Cinderella expressed her gratitude to Aqua.

"I actually want to thank you, for teaching Terra he needs to keep believing," Aqua whispered back.

Cinderella was about to ask a question of her own when the Grand Duke suddenly fell. Lady Tremaine had tripped him. The glass slipper he'd been holding shattered to pieces.

“What will I do?!” the Grand Duke cried in a panic.

Cinderella gave a small shake of her head. “Oh, please don’t worry. You see, I have the other slipper.” She revealed another glass slipper and handed it to the Grand Duke.

“Oh!”

He accepted the slipper and placed it on Cinderella. Her foot fit perfectly.

“We did it!”

Cinderella and Aqua grinned at the voice they could hear from the top of the steps. Sure enough, there was Jaq.

“A perfect fit. I must inform the prince immediately! You will come with me, of course.”

“I’d be happy to.”

Cinderella followed the Grand Duke as he walked out of the mansion with the glass slipper in hand. Aqua left behind them, feeling greatly relieved.

The only ones inside were Lady Tremaine and her two daughters.

“It’s not fair. She’s a scullery maid!”

“Mother! Are you just going to let them leave?”

“No...Cinderella will be put in her place.”

Ominous black flames rose from the trio.

After seeing off the carriage with Cinderella and the Grand Duke aboard, Aqua headed toward where she would bid farewell to this world. But all of a sudden, she heard a scream from the direction of the carriage.

“What’s that?!”

Aqua rushed toward it just in time to encounter the Grand Duke running for his life.

“What happened?! Where’s Cinderella?”

“She—she was attacked by a creature...a monster in the forest...”

“A monster?”

Sprinting into the woods, Aqua spotted a gigantic pumpkin-shaped Unversed writhing before a fallen Cinderella. As the Unversed fired out a barrage of smaller pumpkins that burst all around her, Aqua ran over and helped Cinderella up.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! This is what happens when you go against my wishes!”

As Lady Tremaine cackled uproariously off to the side, one of the pumpkins fell on her and her daughters from above.

“Aaaaahhh!”

The lady and her two daughters vanished with a scream.

“The darkness in their hearts overtook them. Go.”

Once she saw that Cinderella had escaped, Aqua brought her Keyblade to bear against the pumpkin Unversed—the Cursed Coach. Though the Cursed Coach kept firing the same type of pumpkin bombs that did away with Lady Tremaine and her daughters, Aqua sent them flying back toward it and charged.

Patiently deflecting the attacks of its vine-like arm that rained down from above, Aqua jumped and swung downward with her Keyblade. She landed once, then leaped again and chopped off the vine.

“Take that!”

With a mighty cleave of her Keyblade, the Cursed Coach vanished in a flash, leaving nothing but a large pumpkin rolling on the ground.

Cinderella ran up the steps of the castle and met Prince Charming in an embrace. The Fairy Godmother appeared next to Aqua as she observed from afar.

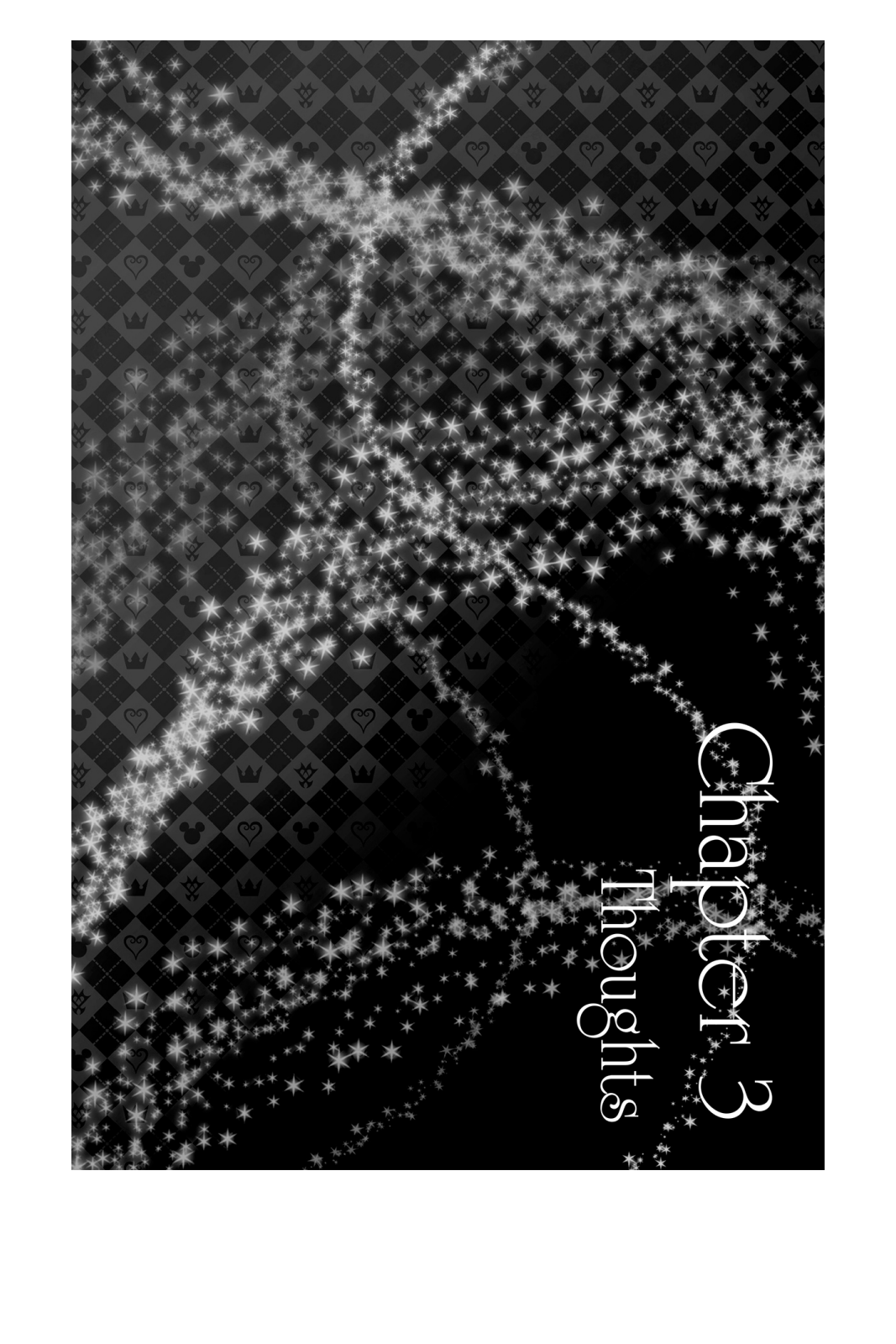
“A pure heart filled with light...It’s strange—the Master taught me that darkness needs to be destroyed. But how, if not with light?”

“Oh, my dear, you’re too young to know. Experience more things and you’ll find the answer. Just trust in your dreams,” the Fairy Godmother explained.

Aqua nodded.

Her own answer...Light and darkness. Two polar opposites.

Terra had said he learned how powerful it was to believe from Cinderella. What would Aqua learn from this world? What lessons would her journey have in store...?



Chapter 3

Thoughts

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VANITAS CHUCKLED AS HE FLOATED IN THE LANES BETWEEN.

While he always used the corridors of darkness to travel between worlds, this was a special occasion. He could see Ventus proceeding toward some world atop his Keyblade glider.

He hadn't seen Ven in a while, but the kid hadn't exactly changed much. His heart of light was flimsy and weak. No match for Vanitas's.

From what he could sense of Ven's heart, it was constantly flip-flopping back and forth between doubt and hope.

Maybe it was about time to get this party started.

Bolstering the darkness around himself, Vanitas moved toward Ventus.

Just believe...

Terra's thoughts turned toward Cinderella as he spurred his flying Keyblade. Not just Cinderella, but Snow White and Princess Aurora, too. The three princesses whose hearts were filled with light.

Had the Unversed appeared in their worlds because they were after the princesses? Or was it something else?

Would Terra learn something if he stuck to the plan and sought out the princesses?

Just then, a single world rose into view—a lofty spire known as the Mysterious Tower. The world that the great Yen Sid called home, he believed.

If everything had started because of Yen Sid's message to Master Eraqus, then Terra could gain some insight if he spoke to him.

Terra landed at the Mysterious Tower.

This world was a bit different from the others—exceedingly strange, in fact. Even when viewed as a world, the tower seemed like it was connected directly to the Lanes Between. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to call it less a world and more of a special island in the Ocean Between.

As Terra walked toward the tower, someone suddenly came

running from its entrance, holding a Keyblade. A disciple of Yen Sid?

Aside from the Keyblade, this newcomer, Mickey Mouse, was holding a glowing star-shaped object. When he raised the star to the sky, it flashed with light, and Mickey vanished along with it.

Ven refused to believe anything he heard from Maleficent or that old woman from Snow White's world. It was like Aqua said: Terra would never do that. Meeting Cinderella had also revived his faith in his friend.

Ven thought about him as he rode on his Keyblade.

All of a sudden, he froze as he sensed an ominous presence. *What's going on?*

When Ven whipped his head around to look back, he spotted that boy in the mask.

Flying unaided in the Lanes Between, the boy faced Ven as he passed by. Ven couldn't see his expression behind the mask, but he had a feeling the boy was laughing at him. Still staring at Ven, the boy slid backward away from him.

Ven wouldn't have had to worry like this at all if it hadn't been for this boy and his comments.

"Him again!" Ven hissed under his breath, then gave chase.

Ven landed on a rocky wasteland. He couldn't sense any signs of habitation. A powerful gust of wind blew by.

"Where's he hiding?"

Looking and listening closely, Ven spun around when he sensed a presence behind him. There stood the boy in the mask.

"All right! What did you mean about Terra being a different person?" he nearly shouted. He was so tense, it was hard to breathe.

"Exactly what I said, idiot. The Terra you know will be gone forever."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!"

The boy's words were as cryptic now as they were the first time Ven encountered him.

Plus, he had no idea who the boy was. It filled him with so much doubt. He was unsure of whether the connection to Terra was the main source of his anxiety or something else.

"Stupid, or true," he said quietly, perhaps intentionally so, and the boy thrust his right hand out straight ahead. What flashed into his fist was—

"A Keyblade?!" Ven gasped in spite of himself. He could wield a

Keyblade, too?!

Ven had never seen another person with a Keyblade aside from Terra, Aqua, and Master Eraqus. The ability to wield one was supposedly quite difficult to obtain. Still, he didn't have time for wonder or hesitation.

Ven summoned his own Keyblade and readied it.

"Good. Let's see what you're made of," the boy said.

He closed the distance between them in the space of a breath. Keyblade met Keyblade, and sparks flew. Knocked back by the boy's upper slash, Ven retreated, but his opponent closed that gap as well. Ven barely managed to stop the boy's strike and fell to his knees.

"Urgh—"

His right hand, his Keyblade hand, was numb from the impact. This was the first time Ven had received such a powerful blow. The Unversed didn't attack like this, and the only other fights he'd been in were against Terra and Aqua in training...Oh. His friends had been holding back. Going easy on him.

"Pathetic," the boy scoffed, and an instant later, his Keyblade swung straight up into Ven's jaw. Ven's body hurtled through the air, then crashed to the ground.

"That really all you got? Man, you are worthless."

Ven could hear the boy's voice. He tasted iron, and the inside of his mouth was gritty with sand. He couldn't get up. *Terra—Aqua, I...*

"I'd be going against the Master's orders, but so what? As far as I'm concerned, your job here is done."

Close by, Ven could sense someone else approaching. But he still couldn't move. He had to get up.

There was a loud roar and a wave of heat. This was it—or so Ven thought when his body was buoyed up.

"Don't worry! You're safe."

The voice was unfamiliar. *Who...?*

"Heal!"

With that cry, Ven felt something wrapping around him, ever so slightly warm. It was recovery magic. Strength surged through his body. Lifting his face, he spied a figure he had never seen before wielding a Keyblade. His savior had big black ears and a thin tail.

Turning away from Ven, he thrust his Keyblade toward the boy.

"Tell me where you got that! Keyblades are not something you use just to bully somebody around! Here, I'll show ya!"

Ven bounced to his feet and moved up beside him.

"We both will!"

Ven might not have been able to win on his own, but with backup, it was a different story. It wasn't cool to just lie down and let him win.

“Big deal. Two losers instead of one.”

The boy readied his own Keyblade.

“Let’s go!”

Ven sprinted forward, swinging his Keyblade at the boy. He didn’t know why, but he could feel great strength welling up within him. Maybe because he wasn’t alone...?

Ven heard someone leap behind him, and his ally was whirling through the air at the boy. His hits were landing.

Perhaps feeling cornered, the boy vanished—until he reappeared in midair and hammered down with his Keyblade straight toward Ven. Ven solidly blocked the blow, and in a complete reversal of earlier, it was now the boy in the mask being driven back. When Ven countered with an attack of his own, the boy dropped to his knees. Ven’s ally followed up with a spinning strike, and even this formidable fighter was slammed on his back into the ground.

He still got quickly to his feet, but he was very out of breath.

“Over here!” Ven’s ally shouted, and he and Ven held up their Keyblades toward the boy, and the light from their weapons pummeled him. He collapsed onto the ground, spread-eagle.

“That’s enough!” Ven’s ally yelled, pointing his Keyblade at the boy. But the boy suddenly leaped to his feet, as if he’d hardly been wounded at all.

Inky darkness rose around him as he stood before Ven and his ally, who raised their Keyblades instinctively.

“Hmph. You win. Consider yourself on probation.”

With that, the boy disappeared into the blackness.

“Probation for what?” Ven muttered, dismissing his Keyblade and turning to face his benefactor—although it was hard to directly face someone so much shorter. Ven didn’t have much experience speaking to people like this. He was always the one craning his head upward when he talked to Terra and Aqua, after all.

“Thanks for before. I owe ya. The name’s Ventus. What’s yours?”

“I’m Mickey,” answered the newcomer with a grin. Ven bent over and inspected the weapon Mickey held.

“I see you’ve got a Keyblade.”

“Yep. I’ve been trainin’ under the great Yen Sid.” Mickey dismissed his Keyblade and continued. “He found out the worlds are in trouble, an’ I sorta took off without tellin’ him.”

“Well, that makes both of us. I ran off, too.”

Ven couldn’t help but smile when as he replied to his fellow runaway.

Mickey pulled out a large, star-shaped object. “All I hafta do is think it, and the Star Shard will take me anywhere I wanna go. At least I thought it would.” Mickey lowered his gaze dejectedly. “I

haven't quite got the fine points down, like when or where...It just kinda kicks in whenever it wants to. But I wouldn't have met you if it hadn't brought me here."

He smiled at Ven, and Ven responded in kind.

"Ya know, it might not be an accident. Maybe it starts workin' 'cause it's reactin' to somethin'."

As Ven and Mickey peered at the Star Shard, it began to radiate a light so bright that Ven had to close his eyes. The luminescence swallowed the pair, and then they were gone.

Atop the Mysterious Tower, Terra made sure he was presentable and knocked on the door.

"Excuse me."

After announcing himself politely, he opened the door. Upon doing so, an elderly man slowly turned from the window to meet him. He had a pointed hat and a long, white beard, as well as fierce, penetrating eyes.

So this was Yen Sid...

"My name is Terra."

He was about to continue with his self-introduction when Yen Sid spoke in a soft yet commanding tone.

"Yes. Eraqus's pupil. I've been expecting you. It is the Unversed," he replied as he sat himself in a chair. It would seem he knew everything.

"Yes, Master Yen Sid. I thought it best to seek the counsel of one wiser than myself."

"I am no longer a Master. I doffed that mantle."

"But sir, wasn't that your pupil I passed on the way in? He had a Keyblade..."

"You refer to Mickey," said Yen Sid with a little sigh, cutting Terra short. "He, too, sought guidance here. As a king, he is good and kind. But the weight of a crown has not cured him of impetuosity. He has left with my Star Shard, an object whose power he does not understand or know how to control."

This was the first Terra had heard about a "Star Shard." *I wonder what that is*, he thought for a second before Yen Sid continued.

"Mickey imagines it will be of help in his current quest. And, like you, he is eager to use his Keyblade to set things right."

"I'm not sure I even understand what's wrong. Master Xehanort is missing...And now I've learned there's a masked boy who is controlling those 'Unversed' on the loose."

"Hmm. To arrive at the truth, perhaps you should approach things differently—first consider them one and the same problem."

Yen Sid briefly closed his eyes in contemplation. Terra pressed him for more.

“Master Xehanort and the Unversed are connected somehow?”

“I must not make assumptions...”

Yen Sid lowered his gaze and shook his head slightly, then raised his head and issued an order in a commanding voice.

“Find Xehanort, Terra. That is where you should begin.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you for everything. I’ll be going now.”

Terra bowed and took his leave.

Before he did anything else, Terra had to find Master Xehanort and speak to him...

“I had hoped, Xehanort, your heart would no longer lead you astray,” Yen Sid said, after Terra was out of earshot.

Master Xehanort stared into the distance amidst the gusting wind. This was the ancient battleground—the graveyard where thousands of Keyblades rested.

He noticed a disturbance in the air behind him and the masked boy, Vanitas, appeared. Without turning around, Master Xehanort reprimanded him.

“That wasn’t part of the plan.”

“Come on, I was just having a little fun.”

Vanitas didn’t pay the scolding any mind, though.

“What’s done is done. The hour is almost here.”

The apprentice of his onetime comrade Yen Sid had come, as had Ventus and Vanitas—it was high time Terra joined them in the mix.

“You had better get going. I’ll be along later.”

“Going where?”

“The city of light,” Master Xehanort replied with a slow chuckle.

Terra’s Keyblade glider raced smoothly down the Lanes Between.

Where was Master Xehanort? His only option was probably to just keep checking worlds one by one...

“Terra.”

A voice abruptly echoed in his mind. And it belonged to...

“Master Xehanort?” he asked without thinking.

The voice echoed again. “Terra, come see me at once.”

Along with the voice, a world rose in the darkness of the sea between.

Guided by the voice of Master Xehanort, who seemed to know Terra was searching for him, Terra set a new course.

The world Terra found was an uninhabited wasteland where a raging wind kicked up clouds of dust.

He touched down on top of one of the steep, looming cliffs. It was there that Master Xehanort awaited him.

“Master Xehanort—I have been to other worlds. I know all about the things you’ve done. I just don’t understand why.”

Though Terra started in with the questions immediately, Master Xehanort shook his head quietly.

Now then, how best to guide Terra into becoming his *vessel*?

The fierce light in Terra’s heart also empowered the darkness within him. The stronger the light, the deeper the shadow, and that would be Terra’s path into the darkness.

Master Xehanort would play the part of a contrite old man with regrets in the past. Exactly like this foolish boy who only *believed* he stole Princess Aurora’s heart, and never stopped to question the source of his anguish.

“Someone had to safeguard the light...from the demon I unleashed,” Master Xehanort said to Terra. “You must know about the boy by now, the one in the mask. His name is Vanitas. A creature of pure darkness. One of my making.”

“Vanitas...Are you telling me he came from you?”

Master Xehanort shook his head softly.

“...He came from Ventus.”

“Ventus?”

As Terra’s eyes opened wide in surprise, Master Xehanort seized the opportunity to swiftly spin his tale and throw him into confusion with falsehoods.

“Yes. Vanitas is the darkness that was inside your friend. While training with me, Ventus succumbed to darkness, and there was but one way to save him—strip that part of him away. And thus Vanitas was made.”

But Master Xehanort’s story was not finished.

“In the process, I damaged Ventus’s heart in the most horrific way. So I did what I felt was right, and left him with Eraqus. I knew the boy could not stay with me, the man who did him such grievous harm.”

Master Xehanort closed his eyes with a pained expression to sell his confession. He turned away from the speechless young man and stared into the distance.

It was true that Ventus’s heart had been damaged.

Master Xehanort had originally raised Ventus to become his vessel, but Ventus had proven to be too kind. Thus, Master Xehanort had split his heart into light and darkness so that he could make use of him in another way. While he had succeeded in birthing Vanitas, Ventus had remained unconscious, broken after the removal of his

heart. Though Master Xehanort had initially tried to discard Ventus after he failed to awaken, for some reason the boy had come to his senses.

In order to cultivate the light in Ventus's heart, he had given him over to the care of Master Eraqus, who believed in its absolute virtue. Though he and Master Xehanort didn't see eye to eye, Master Eraqus had accepted Ventus gladly. And that was where Master Xehanort had met Terra.

Terra's kindness—the intensity of his light—led him to seek strength. Before long, that fixation would beget darkness in his heart. Thus, Master Xehanort's vessel was chosen.

“Master Xehanort...Ventus has gotten a lot better since then. You shouldn't blame yourself for trying to save him,” Terra offered.

Master Xehanort looked up. “Well...Thank you, lad. You know how to put an old man's heart at ease.”

The sincerity of this oh-so-thoughtful boy was plain on his face. Master Xehanort would need to usher him along slowly if he wanted to change that sincerity to agony and stain it with darkness.

“Master...Why is Vanitas still free?”

“Ah, yes. Well, I did my best to contain him the moment he emerged, but...”

“He managed to escape.”

Master Xehanort nodded quietly as Terra finished his sentence.

“Vanitas uses the Keyblade to sow seeds of darkness. And now, you see—the worlds teem with his ghastly underlings.”

“The Unversed!” Terra gasped. He wasn't slow on the uptake; his light just prevented him from seeing lies for what they were.

“He has no control over the darkness in his heart. The Keyblade is not his to bear. He's an abomination beyond hope of salvation. Lend me your strength, Terra. Right this wrong that I have wrought.”

Master Xehanort shook his head, playing up his grief. He knew Terra would never refuse the plea of a foolish old man, and that was why he wove bits of the truth into his false tale.

“But I have no idea where to find him,” Terra muttered, contemplating.

He was so amusingly ensnared now, and Master Xehanort kept up the pressure.

“What I can tell you about Vanitas amounts to this: his darkness is drawn to the light, which he seeks to disrupt...and then destroy. It stands to reason that he will strike next in the city of light, Radiant Garden.”

And thus the players would assemble on the stage.

“Don't worry, Master. I'll take care of Vanitas.” With a forceful nod, Terra donned his armor.

“I’m counting on you,” urged Master Xehanort.

Terra bowed once more, then climbed aboard his Keyblade glider and soared away. Watching him go, Master Xehanort broke into deep, throaty laughter.

“It won’t do for me to be late to the show.”

Darkness loomed up behind Master Xehanort and swallowed him.

Radiant Garden... Terra had never heard of a world by that name. Speeding along on his Keyblade glider, he arrived at his destination.

Still, Terra hadn’t expected Master Xehanort to take him so far into his confidence that he would disclose the truth. Terra was moved by his lament and confession of his mistakes. He needed to live up to the Master’s trust.

He never would have dreamed that Ventus, Vanitas, and the Unversed would possess such a connection.

Terra reflected on when he first met Ventus and his broken heart. That was three years ago...

Terra and Aqua were practicing in the great hall as usual. Training to become a Keyblade Master was grueling, but each day was fulfilling regardless.

The two of them had heard an unexpected noise—the sound of the door opening. Master Eraqus was farther inside the building, as far as they knew, and visitors from another world weren’t just rare, they were nonexistent. Terra and Aqua stopped what they were doing and walked over to where they could see the door. The great hall was on the second floor, but the open colonnade made it possible to see the doors down on the first floor. Standing in the open entryway were a boy with golden hair and an old man with a white beard.

That was when they first met Ventus and Master Xehanort.

While Master Xehanort stepped closer when Master Eraqus came to receive them, Ventus stayed stock-still in front of the doors.

Master Eraqus and Master Xehanort were discussing something as they walked down below; Terra could tell, even after the two of them moved out of sight. Ven never budged, though.

Terra and Aqua looked at each other.

“That boy—is he okay?” Aqua asked.

“I’ll go see.”

Terra quickly went down to the lower level. He was a little happy to have visitors, whether older or younger.

When Terra approached Ven where he stood in front of the doors,

the boy didn't even raise his head. He simply stood there absentmindedly. After a moment, lost as to what to do, Terra spoke.

"I'm Terra. What's your name?"

"...Ventus," Ven replied faintly, without looking at Terra.

"Whew, you can talk! Aqua, c'mere."

Aqua, who had been watching worriedly from above, broke out into a smile when he called her.

She hurried down the stairs and came up next to Terra and introduced herself.

"Hi, I'm Aqua."

"Terra...Aqua..."

Ven merely repeated their names.

"So, are you here to train with us?"

Terra's first question got no response.

"Where are you from? Who was that man with you? Are you good with a Keyblade?"

Terra didn't know why he'd asked so many questions at once. Maybe he had just really wanted to know about Ven.

Either way, the boy suddenly grabbed his head and dropped to his knees, groaning and shaking his head.

"Whoa! What's the matter?"

"Are you okay?"

Ven had simply moaned as Terra and Aqua stood in shock.

"What did you do?"

Master Eraqus and Master Xehanort arrived after noticing the commotion.

"Nothing! I—I just asked him some stuff."

Master Xehanort stepped past them and helped Ven to his feet, and Master Eraqus explained to Terra and Aqua.

"Ventus cannot tell you anything...because he cannot remember anything."

Terra and Aqua looked back toward the now-unconscious boy in Master Xehanort's arms.

Ven wouldn't wake again until much later.

Terra had no idea Ven had such a secret. Back then, he was just happy to have a new friend who stuck to him like glue. Aqua even used to shake her head and say they were just like brothers.

Vanitas was a fragment of Ventus's heart.

Terra had to defeat him, for Ven's sake—and so as not to let down Master Xehanort.

He set out for Radiant Garden at full speed.

“It’s dangerous to fight the darkness with light, my dear...”

Aqua mulled over the Fairy Godmother’s words as she sped along on her Keyblade glider.

She muttered, “Light and dark go hand in hand...”

If so, then why was it wrong to embrace the darkness in your heart? She had learned that darkness should be wiped from existence. Terra couldn’t become a Master at the exam because he couldn’t control his darkness.

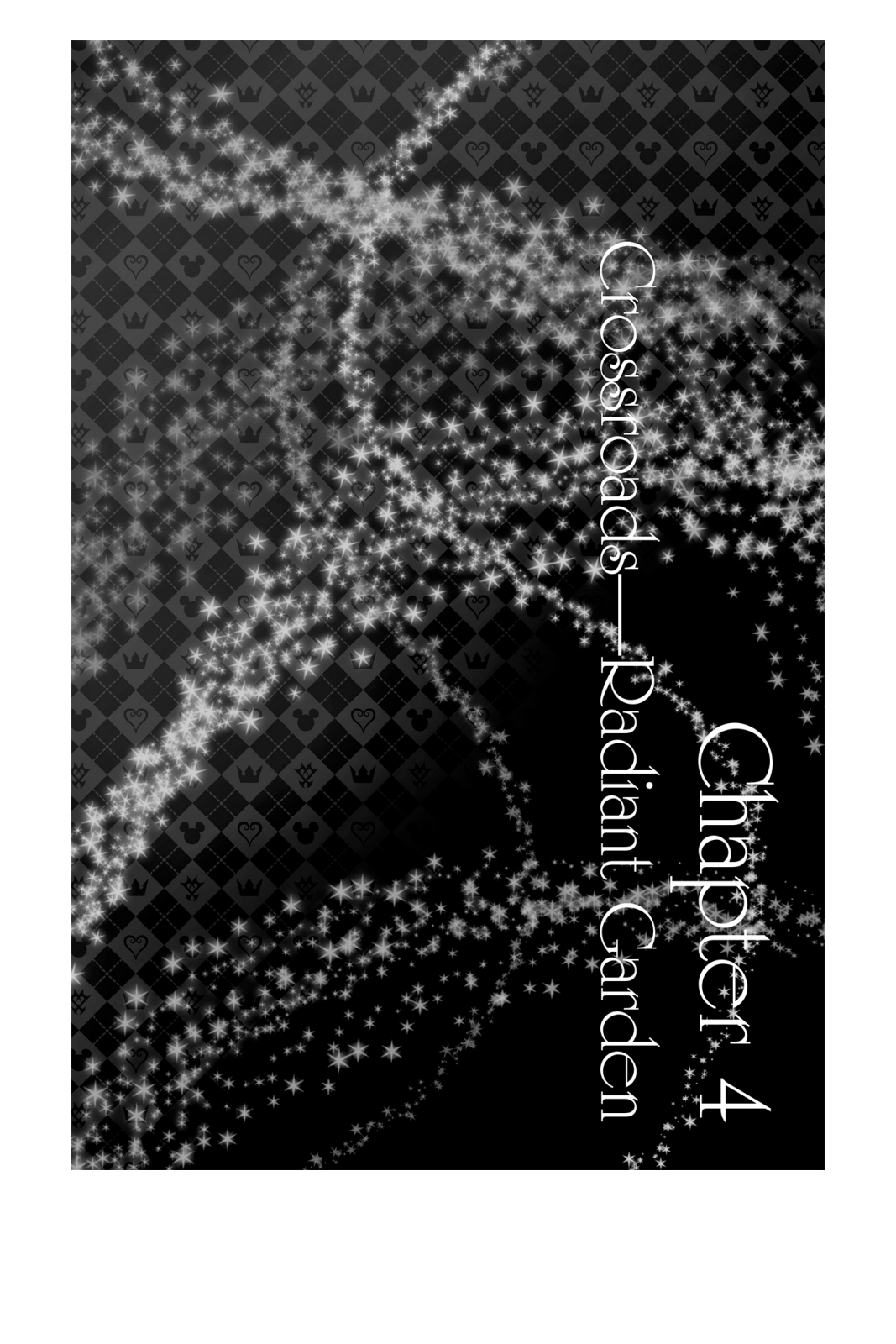
What exactly did it mean?

When she ran into Terra and heard him talk about Cinderella, Aqua had been truly convinced he would never fall to darkness. And yet in the Enchanted Dominion, the next world she had visited, Maleficent’s account of him—hard as it was to believe—had given her an indescribable anxiety. There was no way it could be true. Maleficent’s word didn’t deserve her trust. Still—

“Terra?”

Terra’s Keyblade glider was making a beeline for a world up ahead, one Aqua had yet to visit.

She followed him.



Chapter 4

Crossroads—Radiant Garden

Chapter 4

Crossroads—Radiant Garden

MASTER XEHANORT TOUCHED DOWN IN RADIANT GARDEN AND SURVEYED HIS SURROUNDINGS.

The ruler of this world was said to have researched the heart through different methods than the Keyblade Masters. Though the man's studies did interest him, it was not yet time.

Master Xehanort strolled around this world and found a lone man. He had a dangerous look in his eyes that concealed a darkness in his heart incomparably greater than that of anyone else in Radiant Garden.

No matter the world, one didn't have to look far to find hearts infested with darkness. After all, no heart was entirely free of it. It all boiled down to proportions; a little nudge to a heart with more darkness than light, and everything would begin falling into place.

"You there." Master Xehanort had seen several people dressed in the same uniform as this man.

"...What do you want, ya old coot?"

The man with dark, slicked-back hair turned around with annoyance.

Master Xehanort's golden eyes regarded him.

Ven took in the sights of the square, where many flowers were in bloom. As soon as the light swallowed him and Mickey, he found himself floating in the Lanes Between atop his Keyblade glider, clueless as to how he got there. A single world had appeared, and he'd just decided to land there.

The plaza was full of the scent of flowers. There was even a sort of fountain burbling with clear water off to one side. In its shadow, he saw someone on a stroll, wearing a silk hat and carrying a walking stick. When Ven turned around, he thought he caught a glimpse of Mickey's distinctive round-eared profile running off in the other direction.

"Mickey?" Ven said quietly, running through the square in

pursuit. This world, Radiant Garden, was a beautiful place proud of its ubiquitous flowers.

Ven hustled up the stairs where Mickey had gone and spotted a great castle farther on ahead. As he drew near, defeating Unversed along the way, he saw two gallant young men standing before the castle like guards. They didn't appear to be bad people.

When he ran up to them, the two blocked the pathway with the weapons in their hands.

"Hold on," said the one with black hair, Dilan.

The man with brown hair, Aeus, added, "The castle is presently closed."

Without missing a beat, Ven protested. "But somebody just came this way! He's a friend of mine."

The boy seemed curious. Dilan and Aeus looked at each other, then answered.

"We aren't aware of any visitors. Now run along home, boy, before the monsters get you." Dilan sounded like he was admonishing a child, which dampened Ven's spirits somewhat.

"I coulda sworn it was him."

Those ears were unmistakably Mickey's.

Turning away from Dilan and Aeus, Ven trudged off.

Maybe Mickey was just somewhere else. The moment Ven looked up, trying to pull himself together, a massive Unversed appeared in the air.

"They're here!"

Before Ven could ready his Keyblade, Dilan whirled the big spear in his hand and strode toward his target unerringly.

"Radiant Garden shall not fall under the likes of you."

The other guard, Aeus, also came alive. His weapon was a large ax.

However, Ven darted past them and shouted out, "Leave this to me!"

"Stop!"

"But you're just a child!"

Dilan and Aeus chased Ven, calling for him to stop, but a man dressed in white with silver hair, Even, remonstrated them.

"Now who do you think will defend the castle if you two go skipping off?"

The reliable duo came to a halt.

"But, that boy..." Dilan stared at Ven's back uneasily.

"Never you worry about him. He's a special case."

"A what?"

Dilan raised his magnificent eyebrows and narrowed his eyes at this apparently significant word from Even.

Meanwhile Aeus nodded in agreement.

“Even is right. Lord and castle come first. The boy will have to fend for himself.”

“Which reminds me, His Lordship was asking for you,” Even added, and Dilan and Aeus entered the large citadel.

Still outside, Even muttered to himself while looking in the direction the boy had gone.

“A heart devoid of darkness? Stripped clean of it, at that...Very questionable.”

Ven chased the Unversed all the way into the plaza from before.

“Ach! How dare ye?! Back off, ye fiend!”

The older gent in the silk hat Ven saw earlier, Scrooge McDuck, was yelling at the colossal Unversed. As the monster advanced slowly toward him, Scrooge covered his head and crouched down to protect his body.

“Look out!”

Ven hurled his Keyblade at the Unversed. The weapon struck home, but while the creature’s attention did turn to Ven, it quickly moved to escape the area.

“Wait!”

Ven started to chase it, but a voice called for him to stop.

“Hold on...Wait a moment, laddie. Don’t I even get a chance to repay ye?”

“Oh, you don’t have to.” Ven stopped and replied, his Keyblade still in hand.

More importantly, something had to be done about that Unversed...

But when Ven made to take off once more, Scrooge stopped him again.

“Now, just hold yer horses. I dinna mean me fortune. Maybe a wee bit o’ gold, or a small token of...”

This isn’t the time!

“Well, could ya make it fast?”

At this rate, Ven was going to lose sight of his quarry.

“I know—I’ve just the thing in me hat!”

Scrooge took off his silk hat and waved Ven closer with a grin.

Ven had no choice but to step toward him, and Scrooge whispered with the silk hat covering his mouth.

“Ye can tell me, lad. Ye came here from another world, didn’t ye?”

Ven started in spite of himself, but Scrooge just gave a somewhat uncanny chuckle.

“Dinna worry. Me bill is sealed. Yer secret’s safe with me. I’ll not

be askin' ye any awkward questions. Ye see, 'tis the same with me. I asked a wizard named Merlin to bring me here from another world. After all, adventure is the mother o' industry!"

Scrooge gave him the grin of a duck plotting something devious, but Ven couldn't stop himself from reminding him he was in a hurry.

"Great! That all?"

"Ach, but I'm holding ye up, lad. Here. These are lifetime passes to Disney Town."

Scrooge pulled a small card from inside his silk hat. The card had a lovely picture and the words DISNEY TOWN PASSPORT written on it.

"Ye'll have buckets o' fun there, or my name is not Scrooge McDuck. There ye are—enough for you and two grown-ups."

Scrooge flicked his wrist like a stage magician, and what looked like a single card turned into three. Ven examined the tickets after taking them. The back was inscribed with a symbol that strongly resembled Mickey's silhouette.

"Okay, I'll be off, then!"

Ven put the tickets in his pocket and ran off.

"Ah, to be young again. Say, if I dreamed up something for children to enjoy, I could really rake it in," Scrooge muttered and crossed his arms as he watched Ven go.

Master Xehanort had described the world of Radiant Garden as a city of light, and the gorgeous place certainly lived up to its name. Terra stood in a square replete with beautiful flowers. There didn't seem to be anyone else here aside from a gentleman in a silk hat on a stroll.

But what appeared there was—

"Unversed!"

Several shadows revealed themselves before Terra.

Master Xehanort's intuition was correct. It was possible that Vanitas was here. Strength welled within Terra at the thought.

Wiping out the Unversed in a flash, Terra caught his breath. As he calmed down, he sensed a familiar presence behind him and turned around.

"Master Xehanort...?"

His back was toward Terra as he walked toward the city, but it was unmistakably Master Xehanort.

Maybe he followed Terra out of concern? Or perhaps he had some new information...?

Terra ran after him.

Aqua arrived at a plaza blooming with lovely flowers. She was sure the Keyblade glider she'd seen belonged to Terra, but there was no sign of Terra himself. Maybe he'd landed somewhere else.

She looked around and saw a gent with a cane and a silk hat crossing the square. Aqua ran up to him—to Scrooge.

“Excuse me. I’m terribly sorry to bother you, sir.”

Scrooge stopped and looked up at Aqua.

“Ach, what a well-mannered lass ye are. I’d be pleased as punch to help ye, if I can,” Scrooge replied.

Aqua bent her knees so she could look him in the eye and asked, “I’m looking for a boy who’s not from around here. Have you seen him?”

“Hmm, I think I know just who you’re talking about. He scampered off toward yon castle in a right hurry.”

Scrooge indicated an oddly shaped fortress.

“Thank you so much.”

Aqua bowed, and Scrooge left looking satisfied. She straightened up and gazed at the castle.

“Terra...I hope you’re still there,” she said softly, setting off for the keep.

Beyond the plaza was another park full of flowers, though that was perhaps to be expected. The only problem was the Unversed roaming around everywhere.

“Here, too?”

The Unversed are always in the way, like they know we’re coming.

Decisively striking down the creatures one after another, Aqua ascended the steps leading to the castle. Passing through an entryway, she walked up another set of steps and found the front gates.

She’d run into him earlier, too, but what should she say if she did happen to find him? As she took a breather at the top of the first set of stairs, Aqua heard a young girl scream.

She dashed up the final staircase to find a small girl with red hair being chased by Unversed several yards ahead. She was holding a little bouquet.

“No! Run!” Aqua shouted.

But the girl ended up trapped against the wall. Then the girl somehow slipped around the Unversed—or maybe the Unversed were avoiding her?—and came running full tilt to Aqua. The girl grabbed onto Aqua’s Keyblade in fear.

And as she did, a thrill of light passed through Aqua’s head—or maybe it was just her heart responding. This radiance came from the girl herself.

“I can feel the light.”

It didn’t seem she’d have much time to investigate, though. The

Unversed were gradually closing in on them. Fighting while protecting the girl would be difficult, too.

What do I do? I can't fight like this.

When one of the Unversed leaped to attack, a single shadow swept it away like the wind.

The newcomer with big black ears stood protectively before Aqua and the girl. He was holding a Keyblade.

“Hurry! Ya gotta get that girl to someplace that’s safe.”

“Who are you? Why do you have a Keyblade?” Aqua asked instinctively.

He turned around and said, “I’ll tell ya later. Right now, we gotta stop these things!”

Aqua nodded, picked up the girl, and ran.

She set the girl down in a secure place in the shadow of a wall. “Stay right here,” she instructed, and the girl nodded obediently.

After giving her a good pat on the head, Aqua rushed back to the one who’d saved them.

“Everything all right?” he asked.

Aqua readied her Keyblade in lieu of answering his question.

“Let’s get ’em!”

“Right!” Aqua replied, charging into the pack of Unversed. Meanwhile, her ally sprang from the ground in a mighty leap toward their foes. The sight of his whirling, showy attacks was very reassuring. Not one to be outdone, Aqua fired off magic and supported him with her own battle skills.

I had no idea there was a Keyblade wielder like him out there.

That was Aqua’s honest opinion as she observed him fight out of the corner of her eye. Was he a Master? It was so easy doing battle alongside him that it hardly felt like they were teaming up for the first time. Maybe it was the bond between Keyblade wielders. While they were more than doubly effective together, he probably could’ve done it all on his own.

Watching him take out the final Unversed, Aqua dismissed her Keyblade.

He looked up at Aqua as she caught her breath, and then the little girl ran up beside her. Aqua knelt down so that she could look her ally and the girl in the eyes.

“Thank you. My name is Aqua. I train under Master Eraqus.”

“I’m Mickey. I used to be Yen Sid’s apprentice. I came back to him for some more training.”

Mickey’s tone was cheerful. So he was Yen Sid’s apprentice—it figured that he’d be strong.

Aqua then looked at the girl next to Mickey.

She could definitely feel the light.

“I sense light within this girl. You think that’s why they attacked her?”

“Yep, I think ya might be absolutely right. If ya ask me, she must be somebody pretty extraordinary.”

The girl didn’t appear to understand what they were talking about and simply blinked her big blue eyes as she listened.

“Yes. I’m quite certain she’s someone we’re supposed to protect.”

“Let’s join forces!”

Mickey extended a hand to shake Aqua’s. But just at that instant, a flare of light burst from his pocket.

“Ah, hold on!”

“Huh?” Aqua asked in confusion right as Mickey disappeared into the glow.

The light flitted this way and that, then bounced all the way up into space.

“See ya real soon!” Mickey called to the astounded Aqua and girl—and then he was gone.

What just happened...?

As Aqua stared into the sky in amazement, a bundle of flowers appeared in front of her.

“Here!”

“Are these for me?” Aqua asked with her head to the side.

“I picked you some flowers. Thank you for saving me.” The girl handed the bouquet to Aqua with a smile.

“Oh, they’re lovely. You’re so sweet.”

Aqua looked at the flowers, her eyes closing slightly. How long it had been since she looked at flowers like this?

“My name’s Kairi. Nice to meet you!”

“Nice to meet you too. I’m Aqua. Kairi, about that light—”

“Kairi!”

Before Aqua could continue, a voice called in the distance.

“Oh! Grandma!” Kairi turned around, and ahead of her was an elderly woman. *She must be Kairi’s grandmother.*

“Wait, Kairi, just a minute...”

Before Kairi scampered off, Aqua quietly stopped her and touched the small white pendant hanging from her neck. A tiny light flashed from the necklace.

This was a secret magic.

“I just cast a magic spell on you. One day when you’re in trouble, the light within you will lead you to the light of another, someone to keep you safe,” Aqua explained.

“Thanks!”

Kairi happily expressed her gratitude, then ran over to her grandmother.

“There you are. It’s time to go.”

“Kay!” When Kairi waved her hand from beside her grandmother, Aqua returned the gesture with a smile. “Bye!”

Her light would become something exceptional someday. Aqua could tell.

As the two walked off hand in hand, Aqua could hear Kairi begging her grandmother.

“Hey, Grandma?” “Hm? What is it?”

“Could you tell me that story?” “Again, dear?”

“Pleeease?” “Very well, then.”

She recounted a story so ancient it had become a fairy tale.

Long ago, people lived in peace, bathed in the warmth of light. Everyone loved the light. Then people began to fight over it. They wanted to keep it for themselves. Thus darkness was born in their hearts. The darkness spread, swallowing the light and many people's hearts. It covered everything, and the world disappeared. But small fragments of light survived, in the hearts of children. With these fragments of light, children rebuilt the lost world. It's the world we live in now. But the true light sleeps deep within the darkness. That's why the worlds are still scattered, divided from one another. But someday, a door to the innermost darkness will open, and the true light will return. So, listen, child. Even in the deepest darkness, there will always be a light to guide you. Believe in the light, and the darkness will never defeat you. Your heart will shine with its power and push the darkness away.

Aqua stared at the bundle of flowers as she listened to the grandmother's voice.

Kairi...Something tells me I didn't run into her by accident.

Her light, and then that fairy tale of light and darkness—it was all part of an inevitable fateful encounter.

As Aqua began to walk with the bouquet in hand, she spotted a massive Unversed floating through the air.

“Unversed! It never ends.”

Aqua ran off in pursuit.

And thus, the trio found each other at the reactor in Radiant Garden. Almost as if something had led them there.

“Ven!”

“Terra! Aqua!”

Terra and Aqua lined up alongside Ven, squaring off against the gigantic Unversed.

The timing was almost too perfect.

No, if defeating the Unversed was their goal, then they were bound to encounter each other. Their unbreakable connection had brought them together again—or so Aqua told herself as she tightened her grip on her Keyblade. Did Terra and Ven not question any of this?

Aqua was about to ask them when Terra cut her off.

“We can talk later; let's go!”

Aqua and Ven nodded, holding their weapons firmly.

The colossal Unversed before them, the Trinity Armor, was a giant torso and head with arms and legs floating separately in the air around it.

“Let's take out its limbs first. I'll cover you with magic.”

“Gotcha. Let's go, Ven.”

Nodding to Terra, Aqua anxiously watched Ven dash off ahead of her. She couldn't stop herself from worrying about him because he was still so young. But this was no time to fret. If that's what it took, she'd support him with everything she had in her. Aqua fired off a Fission Firaga spell into Trinity Armor's arms from behind.

Terra leaped up and struck the momentarily immobilized arms from below, while Ven hurled his Keyblade. The arms seemed tough, but it wasn't long at all before they were incapacitated, and then completely destroyed.

“Now for the legs! Stay sharp, Ven,” Terra advised.

“Okay.”

Nodding, Ven took off looking as pleased as can be.

He'd never thought the day would come when all three of them would fight alongside one another like this. He had taken it as a given that he would always be chasing behind them. But now it was different.

He was so glad he'd left home to search for Terra.

Trinity Armor began firing lasers and spinning around.

"Over here!"

Terra pulled Ven's hand and they went underneath the Unversed. Though the legs gave them several good hits, it was better than taking a hit from a laser dead-on. Watching Aqua dance around the lasers at a distance, they attacked the legs.

"You okay, Ven?"

"Of course."

Ven knocked back Trinity Armor's legs with one of his characteristic speedy strikes, bringing them to a halt. Aqua hammered them with some magic, and the legs went down at last.

"All that's left—is you!" Ven charged at the torso portion head-on.

"Terra!" Aqua called, rushing in at the same time.

"Ven! Now!" Terra leaped with a yell.

"C'mon!" Ven shouted, too.

The three of them all leaped separately, bringing their Keyblades down with nearly identical timing. Trinity Armor's torso crashed noisily to the ground. Then, just as its movements ceased entirely, it vanished without a trace.

"Got 'im!" said Terra.

"We make a good team," added Aqua.

"Sure do!" Ven cheered.

All together for the first time in a long while, the trio smiled and started a conversation. Ven excitedly fished something out of his pocket.

"Oh yeah! I got you these tickets." They were the ones he'd received earlier.

"For what?"

Ven smiled at Terra and handed them each a ticket. "Lifetime passes to Disney Town. He said to..." Ven's excitement suddenly turned to annoyance. "He said to take two grown-ups."

"You mean us?" Aqua asked with a laugh, which prompted Terra to laugh, too. It'd been quite some time since he saw them and their smiles, so Ven was happy. But Aqua's grin gradually faded, and before long it was replaced by a stern look.

"Listen to me, Ven...We need to get you home—"

"It's okay, Aqua." Ven glanced at Terra. He really hadn't changed.

It was okay. “Trust me, that guy in the mask is history. He’ll never bad-mouth Terra again.”

Terra suddenly took hold of Ven’s shoulders, and Ven instinctively tensed up. He’d never seen Terra like this before.

“You saw the boy in the mask?”

“Y-yes?”

When Ven nodded, Terra seemed to return to his old self. He let go of Ven and then said the same thing as Aqua. “Ven. You let Aqua take you home.”

“No way. I wanna go with you guys.”

Ven didn’t understand why he was the only one who had to stay home all the time.

But Terra kept going. “You can’t. We have a dangerous task ahead of us. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Aqua was listening to their exchange, and she spoke up quietly. “And what is this dangerous task, Terra? It doesn’t sound like what the Master told you to do.”

Terra fixed Aqua with a look at that. “It might be a different route, but I’m fighting the darkness.”

“I’m not so sure. I’ve been to the same worlds as you and I’ve seen what you’ve done. You shouldn’t put yourself so close to the darkness.” Aqua spoke timorously, never meeting Terra’s eyes, but her words were perfectly clear.

“Listen to yourself, Aqua! Terra would never—”

Fall to darkness, was what Ven was about to say, but then Terra cut him off.

“You mean you’ve been spying on me?”

Spying? What does that mean...? Terra...Aqua?

Ven swallowed and looked at both of them.

“Is that what he said to do? The Master’s orders?”

“He was only...”

Unable to get the words out, Aqua averted her eyes even more. What she had left unspoken was that she had been keeping an eye on Terra under Master Eraqus’s order...?

“Aqua...”

In contrast to Ven with his troubled utterance, Terra’s tone was extremely quiet.

“I get it.”

Expressing his understanding, Terra turned away from Aqua and Ven.

“Terra!”

“Just stay put!”

Terra said this in rejection of Ven and Aqua when they started to come after him.

“I’m on my own now, all right?”

Declaring this in a forceful tone, Terra began to walk off.

“Terra, please! Listen! The Master has no reason to distrust you, really! He was just worried.”

Aqua desperately tried to convince him—but Terra didn’t even look back.

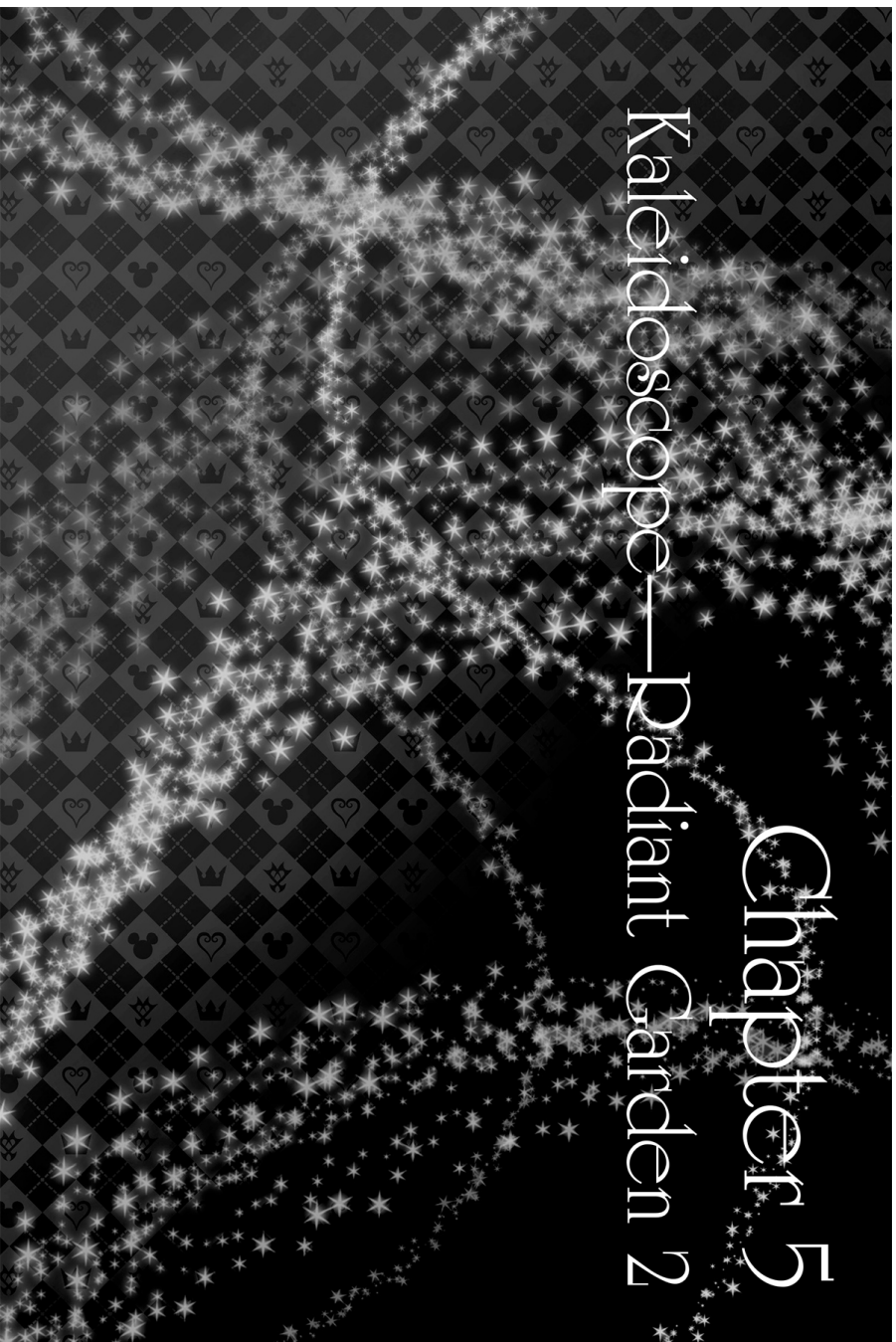


Best Friends

Best Friends

Chapter 5

Kaleidoscope—Radiant Garden 2



Chapter 5

Kaleidoscope—Radiant Garden 2

AQUA'S EYES NEVER LEFT TERRA AS HE WALKED AWAY. She had no idea what to do, and her chest ached. Her fingers tightened around her Wayfinder.

It was part of a set, to keep them together no matter where they were. Their hearts were connected, after all.

But—had she made a mistake?

“You’re awful, Aqua.”

Ven’s comment brought her back to her senses by those words, and she turned to him.

“So now you know the truth. But the Master loves Terra, and you know that, too.”

Ven’s forlorn expression made him look terribly young. He spoke in a small voice. “Were you also ‘ordered’ to take me home?”

Aqua couldn’t help but avoid his gaze. Yes, she had been.

“Aqua...Now that you’re a Keyblade Master, you’ve let it go to your head.”

Ven’s remark stung.

She hadn’t changed at all, she wanted to insist, but didn’t have the confidence to back it up. The Master’s orders were absolute. He couldn’t be wrong.

“I’m gonna go find Terra.”

Turning his back on Aqua, just as Terra had, Ven ran off.

And just like with Terra, she couldn’t pursue. They felt so far away.

Aqua believed the Master had issued his instructions out of love for Terra and Ven. But was that the truth? It had to be. If so, then which had mattered more to her, the Master’s order or her friends? Which was more important to her? Which did she place above the other?

“Terra...”

Why had he said he was on his own now? Because she had doubted him? But she hadn’t, not at all. Terra would never succumb to darkness. And yet...

No, she had been unsure. She *had* thought that he was slipping too close to the shadows. And maybe it was because his friend couldn't believe in him.

"Ven..."

And Ven had faith in Terra. Of course he resented Aqua and the Master when they couldn't do the same.

What should she have done? And what should she do now?

She had to meet with her friends and talk to them again.

Aqua took off running in the direction they had gone.

How could she say that?

Ven hurried through the town trying to find Terra.

Hearing her talk that way, it was no wonder that he got angry. Wasn't Aqua the one who said Terra would never fall to darkness?

The Master's orders... Aqua claimed her instructions to keep an eye on Terra and drag Ven back home were born out of love. The Master's word was law, infallible—but still, monitoring Terra? Maybe the Master didn't trust him after all.

Ven stopped and let out a big sigh.

If the Master didn't have faith in Terra—did that mean Aqua didn't, either? Maybe she'd stopped believing in him after becoming a Keyblade Master. Terra said he was on his own now. But what path would he take?

"He's leaving you behind. And by the time you catch up...he'll be a different person."

The words of the boy in the mask flashed through his mind.

A different person? Did he mean getting too close to the darkness?

Ven clutched the Wayfinder in his pocket.

He needed to find Terra and talk it out. Then they could leave together. There was no way Terra would give in to the darkness with Ven by his side. And if he somehow did, Ven would be right there with him to bail him out.

Looking up and hurrying again, Ven rushed into the square.

In the center, a silver-haired boy dressed in white, not much younger than he, was surrounded by a pack of Unversed. The boy stared at the beasts without showing any signs of fleeing.

"Run!"

Ven stepped between the boy and the Unversed, summoning his Keyblade. The creatures leaped to attack while the boy trotted away to safety.

Ven beat away the Unversed, then took them down soundly one

by one.

Once the final foe was defeated, he heard a reedy voice shouting from a distance.

“Ienzo, where are you? Answer me.”

The man who came into the plaza searching for someone was an adult, but his outfit was similar to the boy’s.

At his call, the kid from earlier, Ienzo, stepped out from the shadows.

“Ah, there you are. Didn’t I warn you not to wander off, child?”

The man, Even, rubbed his chin as he regarded Ven. “I see we owe you our thanks,” he said.

Ienzo stared at Ven silently from where he stood next to Even. Though his long bangs hid half of his face, Ven could tell his eyes were blue.

“We have done our best to raise the boy...since his poor parents are not here to do it.”

Parents...Now that he thought about it, Ven had never met anyone he would call that, either.

“Oh. You’re on your own, huh?” he muttered, but Ienzo didn’t react.

Ven looked up at Even, then asked him, “Sir, I’m looking for a friend of mine. He’s a tall guy dressed kinda like me—have you seen him?”

“Hm...” Even thought for a moment before he replied. “Perhaps I did see him in the Outer Gardens. Just follow this road.”

Even pointed toward a set of stairs leading underground from the square.

“Thanks.”

“No, thank you, for keeping Ienzo out of harm’s way.” After Ven expressed his gratitude, Even responded in kind. After regarding Ven for a moment, he continued. “And...well, let’s say I have a feeling we are destined to cross paths again.”

Destined to cross paths? Did that mean that they would see each other again? Ven didn’t understand. But the man didn’t seem like a bad person, at least.

Silent as before, Ienzo stared at Ven for a bit before he began walking off after Even.

Ven watched the two of them go, then hustled to the Outer Gardens.

Terra left the square and came to a stop just as he entered the shadows of the underground passage. He didn’t have anywhere in particular to be, but wherever he ended up needed to be away from

Ven and Aqua.

“You shouldn’t put yourself so close to the darkness.”

He reflected on what Aqua had said. Maybe he was slipping too close. His mind went back to Princess Aurora, whose heart Terra had stolen himself. That would never have happened if his own heart were strong, even if he was under a spell. And then Snow White had fled when she saw him. But Cinderella had taught him the importance of messing up.

Terra’s dream was to become a Keyblade Master, but Master Eraqus had said the only way was to shut away the darkness within the depths of his heart.

“I care for you like my own son.”

That was a lie.

Master Eraqus didn’t have any faith in Terra at all, and that was why he had ordered Aqua to keep an eye on him.

“Terra, you mustn’t be afraid of losing. Fear leads to obsession with power, and obsession beckons the darkness.”

And what was so wrong with power? No one could do anything without it, and if you had enough strength, nothing could defeat you. You’d never lose—not to the darkness, not to anything.

“Darkness cannot be destroyed. It can only be channeled.”

That’s what Master Xehanort had said. He could channel the darkness, as long as he had the strength. But Master Eraqus had found the existence of darkness within Terra’s heart unacceptable. Which meant the only person Terra could rely on at the moment was Master Xehanort.

And Master Xehanort had told him about Vanitas. If the boy was here, he needed to be stopped.

Terra started forward again, and noticed a suspicious man before him.

He was clad in a navy blue uniform with a red scarf wrapped around his neck. His ebony hair was slicked back, and there was a sharp glint in his eyes.

“You must be Terra,” said the man, Braig. Terra kept his silence, but Braig didn’t care. His tone turned haughty, and he gestured dramatically as he explained. “It’s that old coot—he won’t stop asking for you. I came all the way out here to get you just so he’d clam up.”

“Who do you mean?”

“Ha! Do I have to spell it out? Xehanort, whatever he’s called. You know, my prisoner.”

What a pathetic attempt at a lie. Terra fired back without reacting in the slightest, “You’re apparently not a very good liar. Master Xehanort would never let himself be caught by a thug like you.”

This guy beating the Master? No way.

But Braig just replied, “As if! I’ve got the old coot at my mercy—see for yourself. I’m holding him underneath the Outer Gardens. You better show up before I lose my patience.”

With that, he turned his back on Terra.

“Ciao.”

Terra stood hesitantly as he watched him walk away. Even if he wasn’t holding Master Xehanort captive, he must have some purpose for claiming he did. Terra couldn’t guess his intentions. Plus, if by some twist of fate the Master *had* been taken prisoner, Terra had to help him right away.

It seemed he would need to go find the truth for himself.

Terra began walking toward the Outer Gardens.

A chill permeated the passage below the Outer Gardens. Vast amounts of water flowed into the cistern below the walkway, suggesting this was the source of the fountains throughout the world. It was probably why the air felt so cold. Terra couldn’t hear anything aside from the babbling current. He peered down from the walkway. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Just as he turned back, thinking that the man had been lying after all, he spotted a figure chained to a pillar overhead.

“Master Xehanort!” he cried, but the Master remained motionless. Maybe he was injured. Then, as if he had been waiting for Terra, the man from earlier—Braig—arrived. In his hand was a weapon that looked like a bowgun.

“The old coot certainly knows how to take punishment. Just like I know how to deal it out.”

“You monster! What’re you after?” Terra yelled at Braig as he summoned his Keyblade to his hand. When he did, Braig smirked and pointed a finger at the weapon.

“That thing right there. It’s called the Keyblade, isn’t it? Yep, it seems like these days everybody’s got one of those...even grandpa there.” Braig cast a glance at Master Xehanort behind him, then continued, “When I nabbed him, he told me all about it—what a weapon like that can do. How could I not want one?”

“Well, you’ll find they’re picky about their owners,” Terra spat back. A lowlife crook who would pull something like this could never

wield one. There wasn't a soul who would allow him to have one, either.

All the same, Braig kept at it, scratching his head with irritation.

"Ha! If I heard the old guy right, you're what they call Keyblade Master material. So if I defeat you, that makes me the real keyslinger, if you catch my drift." He turned his bowgun on Terra. "Not the most polite way to go about it...but what can you do?"

All but saying he was ready to go, Terra brought his Keyblade up and made to charge at Braig—only to stop short when Braig wiggled a finger.

"Ah-ah! One more step and the old coot goes boom. You think I'm going to fight fair? As if! That key's too powerful for us to go *mano a mano*."

"Grr..."

That instant, Braig fired black arrows from his bowgun. Terra deflected them with his Keyblade, but he could only last for so long.

How could he rescue Master Xehanort? He didn't have a chance unless he could find an opening to shut Braig down.

The barrage of black bolts sent Terra flying. Braig snorted mockingly.

"Hmph. For a Keyblade Master, you're not very—what's the word?—good."

Just as Braig leveled the sights of his bowgun toward Terra, Master Xehanort's voice rang out.

"What are you doing, Terra? Fight!"

Terra had thought he was out cold, but Master Xehanort was now straining against his chains and shouting.

"But Master, you'll—"

Master Xehanort cut off Terra's protest and yelled even louder. "Never mind me! You must fight! You can't let this ruffian win. Think of your Master, Eraqus—the shame he and your fellow pupils would be forced to bear! Use the Keyblade."

Terra stood up and fixed Braig with an angry glare.

He was right. If Terra lost here, he wouldn't be the only one. His defeat would be the defeat of everyone he knew, and that wouldn't happen on his watch.

Braig gave an annoyed *tch* at Terra's determination.

"Pfft! So much for bluffing."

Leaping backward without another word, Braig began firing off another barrage of arrows from a higher vantage point. With this much distance between them, Terra had no choice but to take evasive action. He knew his chance would come, though.

"Over here!"

Perhaps upset that none of his shots had found their mark, Braig

moved in for an up-close fight with Terra. He then unleashed a massive wave of pitch-black attacks. As he blocked them, Terra swung around behind Braig and dished out a rear attack—only to find Braig attacking from the air instead, as if he could manipulate space itself.

Terra wasn't sloppy—Braig was just a lot tougher than he had expected. It was annoying.

Nevertheless, if nothing changed, Terra wasn't going to win this battle.

He couldn't afford to lose. He was fighting for Ven, for Aqua—no, most of all, he was fighting not to fail. It was impossible, unacceptable, for this fool to take him down. He wasn't that weak. He should've been stronger. He needed strength. *I need more!*

Terra felt a surge of power, and he only hesitated for a moment—no, he didn't hesitate at all. He just hated this man, and himself for losing to him. He was furious with himself, even.

A black mass shot from Terra's Keyblade and grazed Braig's right eye.

The second inky blot brushed by his left cheek and blew apart Master Xehanort's chains.

Braig took off running in fear, clutching his eye.

"This power..."

His right hand was numb around his Keyblade. Terra could see what looked like black lightning around the shaft.

That power just now...Did I...did I mess up again?

"Well done, Terra. You have taken yet another step forward," said Master Xehanort. He had climbed down from the pillar where he'd been bound, and he slowly walked up to Terra.

"But I was consumed by anger...hatred. That was the power of darkness." Terra put his Keyblade away and lowered his gaze.

"Darkness that you channeled," Master Xehanort assured him. That hadn't felt like channeling to Terra, though.

"No, I succumbed to it," he replied. He then recalled something.

"You shouldn't put yourself so close to the darkness."

Aqua had been right all along. Terra was too near to the darkness. No wonder Master Eraqus had asked her to keep an eye on him.

Terra continued to reprimand himself. "Just like when I stole Princess Aurora's heart of light. I can never return home now. I'm a failure."

Terra gave a small shake of his head. *I mean—look at what I did.*

But then Master Xehanort said, "Then don't. You could be my pupil."

Terra raised his head. He wasn't expecting that.

"Master Eraqus, you see, is so afraid of darkness that he, too, has

succumbed—not to darkness, but to light. It shines so brightly, he forgets that light begets darkness. And Aqua and Ventus, they also radiate too strongly. It is only natural that they cast shadows on your heart.”

Master Xehanort pointed at Terra’s chest.

The light within Aqua and Ven—created the darkness in me...?

“Eraqus...He’s such a fool! Light and darkness, they are a balance—one that must always be maintained.”

A balance of light and darkness? Terra had never heard of anything like that from Master Eraqus. What he had been taught, what he had always believed, was that darkness must be wiped out from the heart. At the same time, he had also learned that no one lived without some darkness lurking in their heart. That was why it had to be purged.

Terra had the feeling that Master Xehanort was speaking the truth. *A heart should contain both light and darkness.*

“Terra...you are the one who shows the true Mark of Mastery, but he refuses to see it,” added Master Xehanort.

He was the one who showed the true Mark of Mastery...? The one who failed to become a Master after losing to Aqua?

Terra worried his lip a bit as misgivings swirled within his chest.

He didn’t understand. He was terribly confused. But...part of him also wanted to believe the things Master Xehanort was saying.

The Master then turned toward Terra. “And I know why. It is because he fears you. Join me. You and I can do the worlds much greater good by wielding light and darkness in equal shares.” Master Xehanort took Terra’s hand and gripped it tightly, gazing into his face. “*That is the true duty of a Keyblade Master.*”

“Master Xehanort...”

Who *wouldn’t* be moved by such an appraisal?

Terra raised his head and looked at Master Xehanort. His teachings were different from Master Eraqus’s. And yet, Terra felt that they were closer to the truth. No, he was sure they were.

Master Xehanort nodded grandly and placed a hand on Terra’s shoulder.

“See more worlds.” He turned away from Terra and continued. “Seek out the darkness that upsets the balance. Find Vanitas. And bring an end to him...”

Master Xehanort turned slowly back and declared:

“...*Master Terra.*”

The words struck deep.

Had Master Xehanort just acknowledged him as a Keyblade Master...?

Terra closed his eyes for a moment. He recalled his promise with

Aqua and Ven. His chest was full. *This was our dream—to become Keyblade Masters.*

Terra placed a hand on his chest and then bowed before Master Xehanort in a promise of allegiance.

Ven rushed into the Outer Gardens. If that guy in white was to be believed, Terra should be somewhere nearby. No sign of him, unfortunately.

“Terra!” Ven called, and he spied a figure up ahead.

There he was!

Ven dashed up to Terra. He raised his head slowly and looked at Ven, smiling ever so slightly.

Ven already knew exactly what he was going to say. “Take me with you!” he burst out, gasping for breath.

Terra looked away.

Is it just me, or is something...off?

No surprises there. Terra was probably still angry after what Aqua said to him.

Ven waited for Terra to speak.

“I can’t do that, Ven.”

Ven wasn’t sure how to respond to Terra’s refusal. He lowered his gaze and muttered, “Why not?”

Terra was silent for a moment, perhaps searching for the right words. “I just—” he began, then looked at Ven. “When I really need you, Ven, I know you’ll be there.”

What did he mean, “need” him? Ven didn’t understand for a moment. It still made him kinda glad, and he smiled.

“Well, why wouldn’t I? You’re my friend.”

“You’re right.” While Terra’s usual smile was gone, Ven could see a little of his kindness in his expression again. “Thanks, Ven.”

With that, Terra donned his armor.

“Huh? Terra?”

Instead of answering Ven, Terra swiftly hopped aboard his Keyblade, now in glider form, rose into the air, and flew away.

This was the second time Ven had watched him go.

He left me again...

“When I really need you, Ven, I know you’ll be there.”

He repeated what Terra had said. It was natural to help a friend in need. Obviously, Ven would do what he could for Terra—but what was that business about “needing” him?

Aqua would probably know. Plus, he needed to tell her that Terra

had taken off again.

Ven spun on his heel and ran off to look for Aqua.

Aqua couldn't find Ven or Terra.

She had returned to the square where she first landed. Neither boy was there, either, but just as she was about to try somewhere else, a boy in an eerie outfit revealed himself.

He was wearing a black combat suit with a red emblem on it, as well as a mask that concealed his features...

"A mask? You're the boy that Ventus mentioned."

"Ah, yes. Ventus. Tell me something: has he learned to put up a decent fight yet?" the masked boy, Vanitas, replied.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll be asking the questions," the boy retorted in a threatening tone. She could hear a smile in his voice. "And why shouldn't I? After all, between the two of us"—the boy summoned a Keyblade—"I'm the only one who will walk away from here alive."

"Guess again!" Aqua responded and summoned her own Keyblade. Vanitas's first attack was merciless.

He's fast!

Aqua just barely managed to block it in the nick of time.

"Here I come!"

She couldn't see the look Vanitas's face under his mask, which was even more unnerving.

Aqua moved away from Vanitas, creating a bit of distance, then fired off some magic. Vanitas dodged it, then launched a black bolt from his Keyblade in a similar manner.

The power of...darkness?

Without giving her a moment to make sure, Vanitas closed the gap between them and struck across her torso. The pain of the impact left her breathless. Vanitas launched yet another attack as she clutched her abdomen, but she quickly darted away and used a healing spell before firing a magic attack with lightning speed. Her fireball stopped Vanitas in his tracks.

"Now!" Aqua bashed her Keyblade into Vanitas's chest and sent him hurtling through the air. He tumbled to the ground, sprawled across the stones in the center of the plaza.

Was it over...?

It seemed a bit anticlimactic. Aqua's stomach still hurt, and she couldn't catch her breath. Still keeping her guard up, she approached the fallen boy and touched his mask to see his face.

"Who are you?"

Laughter boomed out from the mask, and Aqua recoiled. Roaring

with mirth, Vanitas swiftly got to his feet. “Not bad at all. Congratulations. I’ll keep you around. Never hurts to have a backup.”

Darkness unfurled behind Vanitas, and he vanished into the inky blackness.

He was fast, strong, overtly hostile, and brimming with darkness. Aqua didn’t know who he was, but one thing was clear—he was an enemy she would need to defeat. Finally catching her breath, Aqua put away her Keyblade.

What was happening in the worlds...?

“Aqua!” Just then, she heard someone calling to her from a distance. It was Ven’s voice.

“Ven.”

He ran up to her. Playing it cool so he wouldn’t figure out Vanitas had been there, Aqua asked, “Were you able to find Terra?”

“Yeah. But—he’s gone,” Ven said dejectedly.

“...Right. Then I can’t stay here.”

“Let me go with you, Aqua.”

“No. Do as I say and go home.”

Ven’s face fell even more, and he lowered his gaze. “Why won’t you let me?”

“I don’t want to put you in harm’s way,” she said.

Aqua laid a hand on Ven’s shoulder and looked him in the face. It was true. She didn’t want to put him in any more danger than he had to be.

“You understand?”

Ven didn’t answer.

Aqua somehow knew he wasn’t planning to go home. With that masked boy after her, and Terra in the position he was in, she couldn’t take Ven with her. If anything, she needed to keep him far away from here.

Aqua activated her armor, jumped on board her Keyblade glider, and left without a backward glance for Ven.

She would meet up with Terra. And she would pull him back from the darkness.

Terra and Aqua are both gone now...

Ven sat down in a corner of the square in a daze, hanging his head. From his belongings, he pulled out a wooden sword shaped like a Keyblade. It was a gift he’d received several years ago—from Terra...

Terra's strike knocked Ven back. In his hand was a wooden sword fashioned to resemble a Keyblade, whereas Ven's was simply a wooden practice blade.

"Giving up already? C'mon, Ven. I thought you were stronger than that," Terra said, hardly even out of breath. Aqua cheered Ven on from the sidelines.

"Ven, you almost had him! Just try it again!"

"Hey wait, you're teaming up now?" Terra protested as Ven picked up his sword again and turned to face him.

To tell the truth, Ven didn't recall much from back then. No—not exactly. That was the day when he started to remember.

After practice, he sat in the usual spot, listening to Terra and Aqua.

"Ven. You see all those dents and nicks you got?" Terra pointed out. "Each one of those is proof you're learning."

Ven gazed absentmindedly at the wooden blade.

It was beat up, that's for sure. He didn't know how to answer, though, so he simply stared at his practice weapon.

"You're trying too hard to move your body. You need to learn to let your body move you. Right?"

Terra stood up with his wooden Keyblade in hand. Ven gazed at him vacantly. It felt like he wasn't actually there.

Felt...? He wasn't sure if he had felt anything, actually. He merely watched.

Terra coughed once, then continued.

"In your hand, take this blade. And as long as you have the makings, then through this simple act of taking, its wielder you shall one day be made."

"Hey, what's that about? Who went and made you Master?" said Aqua.

Ven simply stared at Terra.

"Being a Keyblade Master is all I've dreamed about."

"Well, you're not the only one," Aqua said, and Terra nodded.

"I know."

Then Terra gave that wooden Keyblade to me.

"You, me, and Ven all share the same dream."

Ven tightened his grip on the wooden Keyblade his friend had made himself.

The memory had burned into him like a ray of light. It was the day he became himself.

Terra's name was carved on the handle of that wooden Keyblade. It was Ven's most treasured possession.

Both of his friends had gone off without him, though.

He whirled the practice blade around and held it aloft. *Maybe it's because I'm still in training.*

When he spun it around once more, his hand slipped, and the sword tumbled to the ground. Someone else scooped it up.

"This yours?"

It was a red-haired boy about the same age as Ven, wearing a scarf with a checkered black-and-yellow pattern around his neck. *Who is this weirdo?*

"Lea, we don't have time for this."

A youth with long blue hair, apparently around the same age, stood next to him, urging him to hurry. His jacket had a moon-shaped mark on the chest.

"Lighten up, Isa, it'll only take a sec," said the redhead called Lea as he handed the practice blade to Ven. "You still play with toy swords? That's cute."

Something about his tone irked Ven. What was this guy's deal?

"Now this right here—Ta-daa! Whaddaya think?"

What Lea took in hand was a pair of round toylike discs emblazoned with a strange-looking face. They were the same shade of red as his hair.

"Not a whole lot. Yours is—"

"You're just jealous. I'm Lea."

Yours is just a toy, too, Ven had been about to say before he was interrupted.

"Got it memorized? What's your name?"

"...Ventus," he answered, looking up at Lea, who moved away to create some space and then readied his discs.

"Okay, Ventus. Let's fight!"

"Fight? Why would I wanna do that?" Ven didn't see the point.

"You scared of losing? C'mon. Hope you're ready."

Ven could probably wipe the floor with this scrub if he used a real Keyblade—but he was probably supposed to use the wooden one.

"Yeah! Now we're talkin'!"

Lea's enthusiasm was weirdly contagious.

"You're gonna be sorry!" Ven shouted.

Lea leaped gracefully into the air by way of response. Ven launched himself upward at nearly the same time, and the two met in battle.

Huh? This is kind of...fun.

While the sound of the wooden sword and toy discs clashing wasn't exactly epic, he could still feel the force of each blow.

It had been a while since Ven had fought like this against something other than Unversed.

“Not bad, Ventus!” Lea said with a smile. Off to the side, the blue-haired boy—his name was Isa, if Ven recalled—observed them in exasperation.

When Lea hurled his disc and Ven knocked it away, Lea suddenly plopped down on his rear.

“You...had enough?”

Have I had enough...? What is with this guy?

Ven was caught off guard, but Lea kept going. “‘Cause I’m willing to...call it a draw if you are.”

But this clearly isn’t a—ah, whatever.

Ven was surprisingly not upset.

“From where I stood, the only thing you drew was a big L on your forehead for ‘Loser,’ ‘Lame,’ ‘Laughable’...What did you expect?” Isa said with a roll of his eyes. Ven was feeling the same way.

“Wha—? Isn’t this the part where ya cheer me up or somethin’? ‘You’re just havin’ a bad day,’ or...‘That’s what you get for pullin’ your punches!’ Some friend,” Lea whined, turning toward him.

“Oh, you mean I was supposed to lie,” Isa retorted.

The two of them seemed to be enjoying themselves. Ven was just a tad jealous.

“Ya see what I gotta put up with?” Lea rolled around on the ground. “Sure hope you don’t have friends like him.”

He really was a goofball—but at least he was fun.

When Ven started chuckling, it wasn’t long before Lea and Isa followed his lead.

Isa spoke up when the laughter died down.

“Lea, we have to go.”

“Kay.” Lea stood up.

“Already?” Ven asked, a little lonely.

He turned around. “I’ll see ya when I see ya. After all, we’re friends now. Get it memorized.”

“Okay, Lea.” Ven nodded with a smile. He hadn’t thought he would make friends here of all places.

Ven watched Lea walk over to Isa.

“Friends, huh...” he muttered, then turned away from the other two.

He may not have been able to go *with* Terra and Aqua, but he could go *after* them.

He had to get moving.

Ven set off again.

As he watched Ven go on his way, Isa commented to Lea in a frosty tone, “What is it with you and picking up stray puppies?”

Lea just shrugged. "I want everybody I meet to remember me. Inside people's memories, I can live forever."

"I know I won't forget you. Believe me, I try all the time," Isa replied with a bit of humor in his tone.

"See? I'm immortal!"

"You're obnoxious."

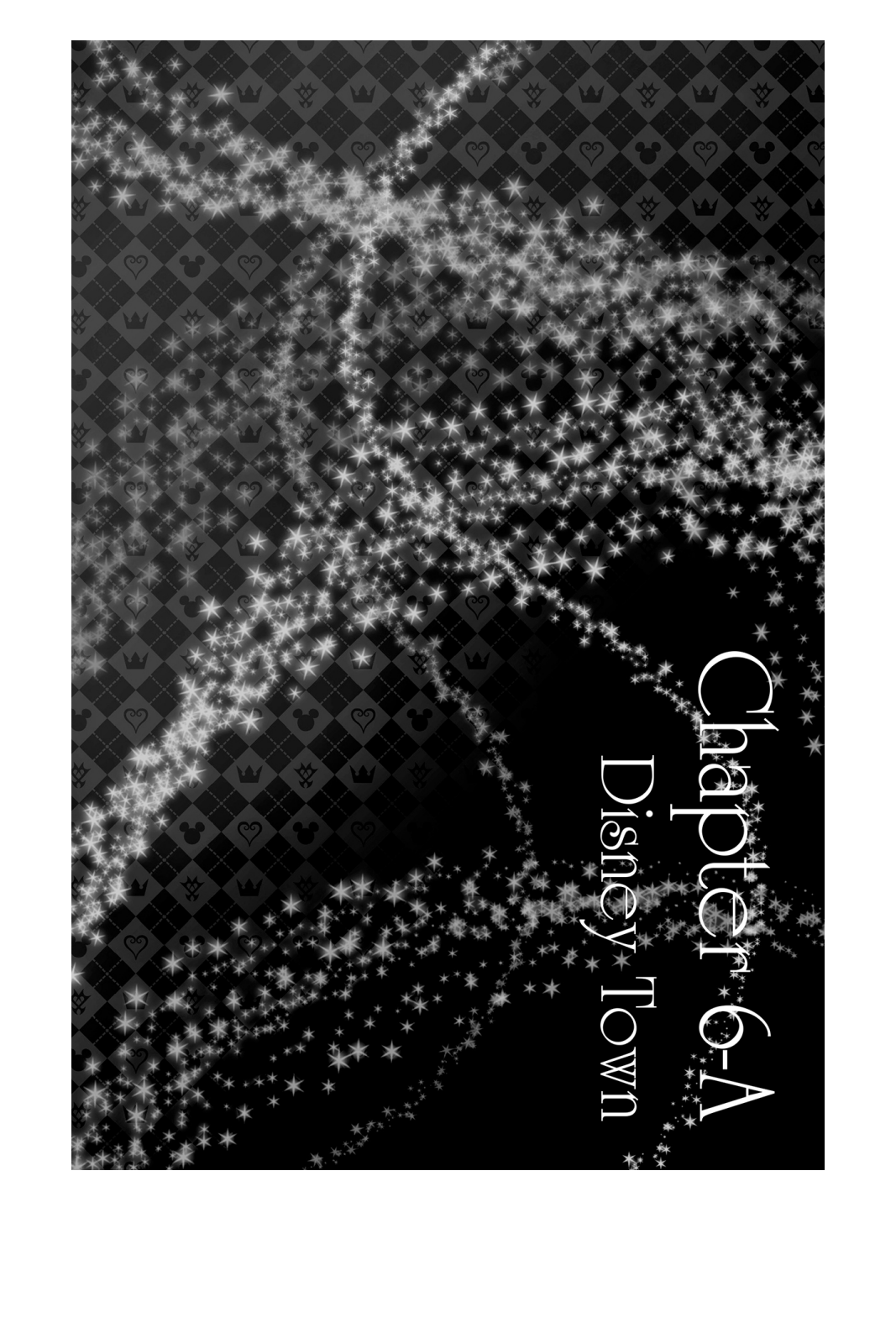
Lea and Isa looked up at the castle looming over this world. Lea's mouth curled into a grin.

Responding to his expression, Isa said, "You ready?"

"Well, I can tell you are."

"Yeah."

Isa nodded at Lea's question, and then the two of them set off.



Chapter 6-A

Disney Town

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Disney Town

AQUA PROCEEDED ALONG THE LANES BETWEEN ATOP HER KEYBLADE GLIDER.

She had to hunt down that boy, Vanitas, but she was also worried about Terra. She couldn't go after him back then, and that was all the more reason why she had to find him now. She had to clear up this misunderstanding.

Not that she knew where to go.

Aqua touched her Wayfinder charm inside her armor.

"I'm on my own now, all right?"

That was what Terra had said. But they were still connected, Aqua wanted to believe. She remembered that ticket Ven had given her, which she kept with her Wayfinder. He'd said that it was a lifetime pass to a world called "Disney Town."

Terra would still have his, too. She might be able to find him there.

Scanning the area before her, Aqua spurred her Keyblade toward Disney Town.

That world turned out to be a very tranquil one. Colorful balloons floated in the clear blue sky, and the plaza where Aqua landed was decorated with a multitude of flags, and lively music was playing somewhere.

She couldn't afford to relax, though. There could be Unversed even here. As she steeled herself for anything, Aqua felt someone coming up behind her and spun around.

"Ta-daa! Wearin' the mask of peace and hope...comes the fearless defender and hero of this town! It is me—Captain Justice!" A mysterious tubby figure wearing a white mask struck a pose and flipped back his orange cape.

Who in the world is he? What's even going on? Captain Justice? Is he

some sort of superhero...?

Aqua was completely confused. At any rate, she couldn't think of any business he could have with her, and she wasn't sure she wanted to get involved with the likes of him. Aqua decided to just leave Captain Justice to his antics.

"Wha—? Now listen, you pipsqueak! I'm Captain Justice. Who are you to walk away whenst a bona fide hero is offerin' his help?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't really need any kind of hero, bona fide or —"

Aqua's polite response was interrupted by just such a call for aid from a corner of the square.

"Somebody, come quick!" the newcomer hollered, stumbling into their midst as if he had only barely escaped from something. Captain Justice and Aqua rushed over to him with almost identical timing.

"What's this? Trouble? Captain Justice to the rescue!"

Aqua decided to stand back and let the two native residents of the world hash it out, but the would-be rescuer, Horace Horsecollar, slumped disappointedly upon seeing Captain Justice.

"You? Well, now that's a shame...Or is it? Maybe this job's perfect for you, Mr. Hero."

Captain Justice bent forward, slightly pleased by Horace's words.

"What?! Name your catastrophe!"

"Those annoyin' monsters have turned up again over in Fruitball Plaza. They're all yours now, Captain J."

Aqua wasn't about to let a report of monsters go unaddressed. Did that mean there were Unversed here, too?

"Monsters?! Well...too bad. Not on the list."

Captain Justice turned his head away dismissively, and Aqua couldn't help but comment.

"I didn't know 'bona fide' heroes got to pick."

"But I wouldn't stand a chance of survivin'—er, of fittin' em into my schedule."

"Gosh, I thought you said you were Captain Justice. You can't leave those menacing things runnin' loose. They're ruining Fruitball." Horace's head drooped, perhaps because he believed there was no else to turn to aside from Captain Justice.

The "hero's" eyes were squeezed shut, and he abruptly put his hands to his ears.

"Huh? Hark, do you hear that? Somebody's callin' for Captain Justice's help!"

Aqua listened closely, but she sure couldn't hear anything.

Captain Justice turned away from Horace. "Do not fear!" he cried. "I am on my way! Sounds like this catastrophe can't wait. But, uh, I'll be back here in a jiff!"

And with that, Captain Justice was gone. Horace watched him go, then said with a big sigh, "Oh, I'm sure you will, Captain Useless. But I don't think I'll stay here and hold my breath."

Aqua had to step in if there were monsters involved.

"I'm anything but a hero, but maybe I could help, if you want," she said.

A smile spread on Horace's face.

"Would you? Oh, that'd be just jim-dandy! Someone needs to trounce those fiends at Fruitball and keep 'em away from the plaza."

"Sure thing. Let's head over now."

Letting Horace take the lead, Aqua made her way to Fruitball Plaza.

"I knew it...!" Just as she'd predicted, the plaza was rife with Unversed. "Please get to safety! I'll take care of this!" she said to Horace.

Aqua summoned her Keyblade and charged into the mob of Unversed. The disturbance in the worlds must have been greater than she thought if they were showing up even in this idyllic locale. A cloud passed over her heart.

When Aqua managed to do away with all of the Unversed, Horace happily ran up to her.

"My, you sure taught those monsters a lesson. You're the real hero in town, if you ask me."

When Aqua turned around, a lady with big black ears and a beautiful tiara on her head was standing next to Horace. She wore a pink dress, and her aura was both elegant and resolute.

Did she remind her a bit of Mickey...?

"He's right, my dear. I couldn't agree more. Thank you so much," she said with a tiny bow.

"Who are you?" Aqua inquired.

"I'm Minnie."

Upon giving her name, the lady, Minnie, simply smiled.

"And she's our queen."

Aqua instinctively took a knee when Horace told her this. "Oh, please excuse me, Your Majesty. Where are my manners? My name is Aqua."

Minnie came hurrying up to her. "There's no need to be so formal. Just call me Minnie."

Aqua took Minnie at her word and stood up, and Minnie let out a long sigh.

"You see, I'm not sure I'm doing a very good job protecting my kingdom," she admitted honestly, lowering her lashes.

"Oh, don't say that, Queen Minnie. We all know how hard it's been since the king set off the way he did. Don't you trouble yourself.

Why, we wouldn't even think of putting on our yearly Dream Festival if we thought there was the slightest chance anything might go wrong."

"Oh, you're very kind, Horace," Minnie said, lifting her gaze as he cheered her up. But her expression was still downcast.

"How 'bout that Pete, though? Captain Justice, my hide! You can't count on him for anything," said Horace as he awkwardly tried to change the subject.

"Wait...you're saying his real name is Pete?"

"Well, it sure as sugar isn't 'Justice.'" Horace shook his head dramatically. "Pete never does anythin' for anybody except Pete. That getup is just an act to get folks to vote for him. He wants to win the Million Dreams Award and hog the prize."

This was all news to Aqua. "The Million Dreams Award? What is that?" she asked.

"It's part of our Dream Festival," Minnie answered. "We all vote for who we think the most admirable citizen is. But Pete seems to have the wrong idea. He thinks that dressing up as a hero and proclaiming that he is one will win him votes. What really makes someone a hero isn't what they wear or what they say—it's the things they do and how they treat everyone."

"Well, in my book, Aqua here is number one. You've got my heartfelt vote," said Horace cheerily, taking Aqua by the hand once Minnie was finished explaining. Aqua was strangely happy to hear it.

"Thanks. I promise I'll try not to let you down," she replied with a grin.

"See that you don't! My vote's very important." Horace nodded soberly at Aqua.

"Oh dear, he sounds serious," said Minnie with a giggle, which made Aqua laugh, too.

"Being popular is tough."

What really makes a hero is the things they do and how they treat everyone. Aqua felt it was an important lesson. She looked up at the sky. Well, it was time she set out for the next world.

Mulling over what she'd learned, Aqua put Disney Town behind her.

Ven had made a friend named Lea in Radiant Garden and another named Herc in Olympus Coliseum. Who would he get to meet in the next world? He got excited just thinking about it. Ven had always thought Terra and Aqua were his only comrades, but now he knew that there were others out there for him to meet. He wanted to make more and more friends.

Ven's heart raced as he rushed down the Lanes Between on his Keyblade glider. He already knew the next world he was heading for: Disney Town. The place on that ticket he got from Scrooge looked super fun. He had a hunch he'd meet some kindred spirits in a world like that.

Ven set down lightly in Disney Town.

Just as he'd thought, the place was delightful. What appeared to be a plaza was decked out with tons of flags and balloons floating in the air, and in the distance was a castle with a blue roof.

"Ta-daa!"

Suddenly, he heard a shout and spotted the flutter of an orange cape.

"Whoa!"

"Wearin' the mask of peace and hope...comes the fearless defender and hero of this town! It is me—Captain Justice!"

Ven leaped away instinctively from the figure in orange when he materialized, spun around, and struck a pose. Who was inside the white mask and costume...? A fat man...maybe?

"Uhhh..." Ven wasn't sure how to respond to such an abrupt encounter with a kook calling himself Captain Justice. He...didn't seem to be hostile, at least.

"Young fellow! Do my hero-senses detect that you got troubles? Just say the word, and Captain Justice will make all your problems disappear!"

"M-me?" Ven asked, and Captain Justice nodded grandiosely. "I'm just trying to, uh..."

I wanna make new friends! That said, Ven didn't really want to know Captain Justice any better...

"C'mon, kid. Anything at all."

"Never mind, forget it. I'm okay."

Friends were something you had to find yourself, not ask someone else to make for you.

"Don't be intimidated by my magnificence. Go on and spit it out. Then...remember to vote Captain J."

"Vote?" Ven asked, unsure what that was all about.

Captain Justice averted his gaze and crossed his arms to sweep that little comment under the rug. "Oh! Well, uh, forget that. How can I help? That's the only reason I'm here."

"Umm..."

Ven couldn't come up with anything when this guy asked out of the blue. But there was something he really wanted to know right now...

"I know! Tell me about your town. Everything's so festive. Is it always like this?"

“Huh? That’s it—nothin’ else? Well, the festivities are on account of the Dream Festival—which is why I’ve made sure there’s carnival stuff all over town.”

“Really? Like what?”

“Ho-ho! You gotta see it for yourself. Wouldn’t be much of a dream if I just told ya.”

Ven might be able to make friends if he enjoyed the attractions with other people. The mere thought lifted his spirits.

“Right. Thanks.”

When Ven expressed his gratitude, Captain Justice turned around and said, “And kid, don’t you go forgettin’...Captain Justice is the one who solved all your problems. That would be Justice with a J.”

“Uh, sure. I got it. Captain Justice.”

While it didn’t seem they would be friends, Ven wouldn’t forget the favor.

“Aww, phooey! This stinks! Now we can’t open the ice cream shop!” Behind Captain Justice, someone seemed upset about something.

“Trouble? Rescue is on the way!”

Captain Justice took off toward the person in need. There stood a group of three, who looked a lot like the gent in the silk hat who’d given Ven the tickets to Disney Town, and a lady in a pink dress and tiara who reminded him of Mickey.

Ven followed after Captain Justice and spoke to them. “What’s going on?”

“Well, if it ain’t the last kid Captain Justice saved. ’Fraid you’ll have to get in line. I’m working on another catastrophe here for these fellas—Huey, Dewey, and Louie, my good friends.”

The trio Captain Justice had named turned toward Ven. So the one in the red cap was Huey, the one in the blue hat was Dewey, and in green was Louie.

“Now, I’d hardly call it a catastrophe.” The girl in the dress was the one who answered Captain Justice.

“Yeah, all we were tryin’ to do was make our own special-recipe ice cream.”

“And we had a little trouble.”

“C’mon, it’s not that big a deal.”

Huey, Dewey, and Louie added their thoughts in succession.

“I’m one hundred percent positive you’re the victims of sabotage!”

“Not even close! Quit makin’ stuff up.”

“It’s just the ice cream machine.”

Irritated, Dewey and Louie turned around toward a mysterious contraption.

“Unca Scrooge left it for us...but we can’t figure out how it works

'cause it's so complicated," said Huey.

Was Uncle Scrooge that old guy in the top hat?

"Aw, we're sorry, Queen Minnie. We wanted you to be the first to try our special-recipe ice cream," Dewey sighed.

"Oh, boys, it was very sweet of you to think of me," replied Queen Minnie gently, turning around.

"We tried..." Louie drooped his head sadly.

"Say no more. Leave it to me—one bowl of ice cream comin' right up!" Captain Justice made as if to climb onto the machine.

"You're just gonna make a mess. Leave it alone, Pete!" Dewey scolded with a stern look.

Uh, who's Pete? Ven wondered as Captain Justice cried out, "That's Captain Justice!"

Huey and the others shared a look.

"Well, I suppose. Let's have a look."

"That's right! Captain Justice will fix everything!"

Captain Justice interrupted Minnie's defeated proposal and clambered onto the machine.

The device had two keyboard-like controllers attached to it, which Captain Justice began punching at haphazardly.

"It just needs a little o' this, right?" Ice cream began shooting out of an opening on the front of the machine.

"Ack!"

Huey covered his eyes as the ice cream splattered all over the stage.

"What's the matter with this thing?!" Flustered, Captain Justice hammered away at the controllers even harder, but the dessert merely continued to go everywhere. "Gah! This machine is busted!" he cried as he hopped off of the device. "It just needs a good poundin'..."

"It does not!" said Minnie, far more severely than when Captain Justice had started "fixing" the contraption.

"Hey, do you think I could give it a shot?" Ven asked Huey and the others.

"No, if Captain Justice can't fix it, there ain't nothin' you can do, kid," Captain Justice snapped.

"Maybe not, but there's no harm in trying," replied Ven with a smile, and Huey held out a file to him.

"Yeah! And better you than him. Here ya go. These are the directions for the machine."

All that was written inside the documents were instructions on how to use the switches on the controllers to change the trajectory of the ice cream.

"Hey, wouldn't this work if the three of you were there to catch it?"

“Whaddaya mean?” Dewey tilted his head quizzically.

“I’ll work the controls, and then give signals for each of you guys to catch the ice cream. None of it ends up on the ground that way, right?”

The trio shared a look at Ven’s idea.

“That ain’t gonna work!” Captain Justice howled.

“Okay, let’s give it a try!”

The three of them nodded.

“All right, here goes nothing.” Ven boarded the machine, while the trio lined up on stage.

“Hey, this might get a little confusing, huh?”

“How about we sing along together?”

“Yeah, and you fire off the ice cream in time with the tune!”

“Got it!”

Ven agreed to their idea, and the trio began singing in rhythm.

“Here it comes!” Ven tapped the controllers to the beat.

“Wow, nice job!” said Dewey as he caught the ice cream.

“Now over here!” Louie caught some next.

“Me, now me!” Huey got the final scoop.

“Oh, wonderful!” Minnie called out cheerfully.

“We did it!”

The three boys ran up to Minnie with the ice cream.

“Try some!”

“Try some!”

“Try some!”

When they all offered their ice cream to Minnie at once, she said, “I’ll sample them one at a time,” and took a bite of each.

Ven watched as he got down from the machine.

“Mmm, how yummy. What a wonderful treat! I don’t think I’ve ever had such delicious ice cream. Thank you—uh, oh, oh dear…” Minnie looked up at Ven, her head tilted quizzically to the side.

“Oh, Ventus. Just Ven is fine.”

“Thank you, Ventus,” Minnie said with a small bow.

“Way to go, Ven!”

“I see…We had to push this thingamajig the other way.”

“Hey, I just got an idea! We could let our customers make up their own favorite flavors of ice cream!”

Huey, Dewey, and Louie all chattered together happily.

But then Captain Justice cut in to spoil the fun.

“Not with that machine! Well…The kid mighta got it to work this one time. But junk like that needs to get junked!”

“Don’t you dare, Pete!”

Minnie’s shout stopped Captain Justice’s upraised hand.

“Fine. But Captain Justice will return!”

Defeated, Captain Justice left the scene.

“About ‘Captain Justice’—you said his name is Pete?” The question that had been bothering Ven for a while.

“Yeah, he’s the biggest troublemaker in town!”

“I bet he’s just callin’ himself Captain Justice ‘cause he wants to win the Million Dreams Award.”

Huey and then Dewey grumbled.

“What’s the Million Dreams Award?” Ven asked.

“That’s one of the Dream Festival events. Everyone votes for who they think is the town’s most exemplary citizen,” said Minnie with a hint of sadness. Oh, so that was why Captain Justice had mentioned votes.

“And if ya win the award, ya get a really cool prize,” Dewey told Ven.

“Oh, it’s just a small token, nothing elaborate,” Minnie said, and the trio looked at Ven. “The event is supposed to help us appreciate how much we all look out for each other every day. That’s the spirit of the award.”

“Well, that sounds nice...” Ven nodded in understanding.

“Pete just wants to get his grubby hands on the prize.”

“And he knows that nobody’s gonna vote for him if he puts his own name on the ballot!”

“But nobody’s fooled!”

The trio all nodded at one another.

The most exemplary citizen. Ven wished someone would find *him* exemplary.

“In our book, that’s you, Ven!” Huey said.

“Huh? Me?” Ven blurted out in surprise.

“Yeah! Without you we would’ve never got the ice cream!” Dewey chimed in encouragingly.

A little embarrassed, Ven quietly said, “...I see, thanks. Hey, are we friends?”

“Of course we are! Don’t be silly!”

This time all three of them jumped and shouted.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right...”

Ven smiled and looked up at the bobbing balloons. It really did make him so happy to find friends and help them. Would he be able to do something for Terra and Aqua, too?

What a boring world.

These little collections of good-natured souls were such a drag. No darkness anywhere. Lying on a rooftop, Vanitas took in the sights and sounds of this place and its lighthearted music.

“It is me—Captain Justice!”

A man suddenly appeared, interrupting three kids with their heads together discussing something.

Sensing the barest trace of darkness, Vanitas sat up and peered down from the roof. While this guy definitely had some darkness, it was extremely faint. If Vanitas’s darkness was an inky black abyss, Pete’s was more of a muddy puddle.

“If we press this it’ll make the ice cream taste better, don’t ya think?”

“Wish Unca Scrooge could’ve sent us a real manual.”

“He’s probably off somewhere makin’ his own ice cream!”

The three of them were talking with their backs to Pete.

“Hey, you kids! Are you in dire need of rescue?”

“Nope, not at all. And even if we were, we wouldn’t ask you for help!”

Vanitas stood up from his vantage point and rubbed the jawline of his mask.

This guy would probably tumble to darker depths one day. Vanitas chuckled as he thought about that. He opened a Corridor of Darkness behind himself and disappeared into it.

Donald and Goofy were watching the sky, sitting together on the steps of Disney Castle where it gazed benevolently down upon Disney Town. The music from the festival was faint in the air. Though Queen Minnie had worked hard to direct the event, the two of them were too upset to take part for the moment. As for why they were so glum...

“Gawrsh, the king must be pretty far away by now...” Goofy let out a big sigh.

“Wak! Guess we’ll just have to go see Master Yen Sid!” Taking his magic staff in hand, Donald rose determinedly to his feet.

“Uh, but didn’t Mr. Yen Sid tell us not to worry?”

Not long ago, the two of them had received word from Yen Sid about Donald and Goofy’s beloved friend Mickey, who was also their liege as the king of this world. Mickey had been training under the great sorcerer Yen Sid for quite some time. However, the message they’d received had said Mickey was no longer with him.

“We won’t know for sure unless we ask him ourselves!”

“Maybe you’re right...”

“Let’s go, Goofy!”

Donald waved his staff. Goofy looked up at him, and then he stood, too. “Yeah, guess we should. It might be best to go and ask Mr. Yen Sid ourselves.”

The two nodded in agreement and looked up to a certain star

gleaming in the cloudless sky.

Where should I go now...?

Terra wondered absentmindedly as he rode his Keyblade glider.

He knew he had to defeat Vanitas, as Master Xehanort had ordered, but he'd found nothing on Vanitas on the two worlds he visited after Radiant Garden. What's more, he knew he just needed to keep plunging ahead—and still he harbored doubts. He had to travel the worlds and take down Vanitas, yes, but his encounters on the last two worlds had confused him.

If the balance of light and dark was what brought stability to the worlds, then all he needed to do was take a different course from Aqua's intense radiance—the best thing for him to do was edge toward the darkness and control it.

But at the same time, he couldn't forget his bond with Aqua and Ven, as Experiment 626 had taught him back in Deep Space. What was he supposed to do?

Terra spotted a beautiful world up ahead and recognized it as the one on the ticket Ven had given him—Disney Town. He accelerated, as if to shake off his thoughts.

Compared to the worlds Terra had just visited, this one was almost bizarrely serene. Balloons of vibrant hues floated in the clear azure sky. The castle with a blue roof at the center of the world—did another of the princesses live there?

Terra walked along a wooden fence lining a wide road in what appeared to be a pasture. What kind of road was this? he wondered. As he did, he spied something scuttling down the big path on the other side of the fence. It was—

"Unversed!" Terra cried out, leaping the rail and readying his Keyblade. The Unversed were riding something similar to small karts as they raced past Terra, too fast to catch on foot.

"I'll take you on."

The only option was to pursue them on his Keyblade glider. Just as he donned his armor, a woman shouted, "Look out behind you!"

What came into view when Terra turned around was a big purple-and-black vehicle. He hit the dirt to avoid it, and it sped by him in a cloud of dust.

Terra brushed the dirt off as he stood up, then turned to the concerned-looking owner of the voice. She looked like a princess in her tiara and pink dress, accompanied by a dog whose brown fur had

a slight gold tinge to it, and two small chipmunks.

"It's dangerous here. Come over this way."

"Yeah!"

"Over here!"

"Woof!"

Terra joined the princess, the two chipmunks who followed her, and the dog, who wagged his thin black tail as they walked. They passed under a banner with RUMBLE RACING written on it and into a pit that looked to be the entrance.

"Thanks for piping up back there. I mean it. The name's Terra."

"And I'm Minnie."

After Terra and Minnie introduced themselves, the chipmunk with the black nose, Chip, asked, "What're you, nuts, runnin' out onto the course like that?"

The chipmunk with the red nose jumping up and down beside him, Dale, chimed in, too. "Yeah, that's against the rules!"

"I'm sure you had your reasons, but I can't say that I approve, either." Minnie admonished Terra in a calm tone.

"Well, rules don't apply when you're up against the Unversed." He wouldn't be able to beat them if he followed protocol.

"Rules don't apply?! You sound just like Pete!" Chip shouted accusingly.

An instant later, Dale yelped, "Look, it's Captain Dark!"

Turning around, Terra found a figure standing on a bridge a short distance away, his back to it so he could show off his purple cape fluttering in the wind.

"Disguised in shadows, the rogue racer reigns!" With a dramatic call, the figure spun around and leaped down from the bridge. "I am... Captain Dark! And you must be the chump who made me miss a new track record." He struck a pose. This person who called himself Captain Dark looked to be the one driving the kart that almost ran him over.

The heel, costumed in gaudy black and purple, walked up to Terra and looked him in the face.

"Hold on...How's come I don't know you? Somebody bringin' in a ringer?"

"I'm not a—"

—*racer*, Terra was about to object, when Captain Dark put an arm around his shoulder. Terra scowled; this guy seemed pretty fishy. But Captain Dark paid this no mind and continued.

"Must be downright temptatious to try 'n' stop a primo racer like me from gettin' the record. But we all gotta play by the rules, rookie."

Having said his piece, Captain Dark turned away from Terra and the others and strode off.

“Now just a second! You’re the no-good cheater who’s always breakin’ the rules!” Chip called toward his back, but it seemed Captain Dark didn’t hear.

Terra turned toward Chip and the rest and said, “I can’t say racing interests me, but I need to defeat the Unversed. Tell me what I’ve gotta do.”

“Are you talkin’ about all those karts that look like scary, ugly monsters?” Terra nodded at the query. He couldn’t ignore Unversed.

“Hmm.”

Chip and Dale began to brainstorm when Minnie piped up.

“Well, we’ve only ever seen the monsters on the track...”

“That’s it! Terra, you just need to enter the races!” Chip cried as the idea came to him.

“And while you’re at it, take that Captain Dark down a notch or two. He’s always breakin’ the rules and causin’ trouble,” Chip rattled on.

“I have to become a racer?”

Chip and Dale nodded energetically when Terra asked this in response. As Terra considered this for a moment, Minnie worriedly began, “Now, I’m sure I don’t have to tell you—”

She seemed to be having trouble saying it directly, so Terra finished for her. “I know. I’ll play by the rules.”

Minnie placed her hands over her chest in relief at Terra’s response.

“Yay! Terra’s gonna be a new racer!” Dale whooped.

“I’ll get you signed up, so gimme a holler when you’re ready,” Chip instructed.

“Okay, then I’d like to enter now,” Terra replied.

“What kart do you wanna use?”

“I can just use mine.” He held up his Keyblade.

Apparently, there were a few hoops to jump through for that as Chip filled in some forms. Dale bounced up and down beside him.

“You’re really somethin’ else, Terra! I can’t believe you’ve got your own!”

“Is there anyone else in the race besides the Unversed and Captain Dark?” Terra asked Minnie as he entered the gate.

“I believe Huey, Dewey, and Louie have also entered.”

“Who are they?”

“Three mischievous little brothers. They live here in town,” Minnie replied to Terra when he cocked his head quizzically.

“I’d be going up against them, too; is that okay?”

Terra didn’t have any qualms about doing battle with Unversed, but he was hesitant when it came to other people, even Captain Dark.

“A race is a race! Beat those three and Captain Dark, and you can

come in first, Terra!”

With a nod at Dale, Terra tossed his Keyblade into the air and transformed it into his glider.

“I ain’t losin’ to no rookie!” Captain Dark entered the circuit late.

Huey, Dewey, and Louie—the trio Minnie had mentioned, dressed in red, blue, and green caps respectively—also stood by on the track. There was just one more kart—an Unversed in the shape of a red vehicle that was waiting for things to start. There were six racers in total.

When the countdown hit zero, all of the machines took off at once. Terra was a little confounded at first—he’d never piloted a Keyblade glider on the surface before—but he gradually got the hang of it. He was still lagging behind.

Terra accelerated his Keyblade.

“Eat this!”

Captain Dark, who was cruising up ahead, twisted around and threw a bomb behind him.

Terra swerved out of the way and sped up even more to overtake the captain. At the head of the pack was Huey in his red hat. Trailing after him were the Unversed, Dewey with the blue cap, and then Louie in green. Passing Louie and Dewey, Terra rammed his glider into the Unversed, knocking it away.

“Fire!”

But Dewey launched a missile at Terra, which sent his glider into a spin.

“Shoot!”

To make matters worse, he got sucked right up into a whirlwind snaking its way through the course. His glider hurtled through the air.

“Aaaaaagh!”

The tornado must’ve gotten Captain Dark behind him, too. Just as Terra was about to crash into the ground, he somehow managed to right himself and hurried on ahead. The goal had to be close. He was sure Dewey and Huey were the only ones ahead of him now. Just in front of Huey, Dewey slammed on the gas and made a mad dash for it. Terra had no choice.

He rammed his glider into Huey as hard as he could.

“Waah!”

Huey’s kart whirled around and crashed into Dewey’s. The two vehicles spun out. Now the goal was dead ahead.

“All right!”

And with that, Terra raced right through the finish line.

“Amazing work, Terra!”

Chip's praise was accompanied by fireworks. Terra was the winner.

"My kart musta sprung a spring! You yahoos just wait—next time, I'll clobber all of you!" Pete howled his parting shot before running off.

"Yippee! I hope he's gone for good. Nobody's gonna vote for a weasel like you, Pete!" Dale hopped excitedly.

"Pete? Vote? What're you talking about?" Terra asked as he disembarked from his Keyblade glider.

While he was doing that, Minnie approached. "Chip means the Million Dreams Award—it's a very popular part of our Dream Festival. Everyone in town votes for who we think is the most exemplary citizen." Her expression darkened.

"And since everybody knows how much of a troublemaker Pete is...he probably figured wearin' a disguise was the only way he'd get any votes." Chip filled in for Minnie where she left off.

"No votes, no prize! Wonder what it is..." Dale interjected.

Chip returned to his explanation. "Yeah, the prize is all he really wants anyway. He doesn't care about bein' a good citizen."

Apparently, Captain Dark was a person named Pete in disguise.

"Oh, I think that's very sad. The award is supposed to help us appreciate how much we all look out for each other every day." Minnie shook her head faintly.

Beside her, Chip jubilantly declared, "Well, one thing I know for sure: I'm votin' for Terra! Your racing really saved the day against those monster karts!"

"Hip hip hooray for Terra!" Dale added.

The shower of praise lifted Terra's spirits a little. Plus, he had learned something important.

"Well, I got something out of it, too. I learned that you don't always have to bend the rules to reach your goals."

"Indeed." Minnie nodded with a smile.

Terra had been prepared to slip into darkness to complete his mission, but maybe there was a means of doing so without giving himself over to shadow. He embraced that sliver of hope.

"We're going to hold the award ceremony after the vote, so would you please join us?"

"Of course."

Terra gave her a firm nod.

The stage was in a plaza on the other side of the racetrack, and the residents of this world were assembled in front of it. Somewhat reserved, Terra watched the platform from behind the crowd.

“Who’ll win the Million Dream Award this year?”

“I hope it’s the guy I voted for!”

“I voted for him, too!”

“Now that we got so much business at the shop, maybe we’ll be number one!”

“Wow, Unca Scrooge sure would be proud of us if we actually won!”

“Yeah, and I bet Unca Donald would be pretty surprised, too.”

Queen Minnie appeared before the excitedly chattering throng.

“Hello, everyone, and thank you for waiting. Now, it’s time to begin the main event of our Dream Festival—the Million Dreams Award presentation.”

Next to Minnie, a lady in a classy violet dress, Daisy, stood ready to assist.

“Heh! Just skip to the part where you say my name. This is a shoo-in!” Dressed in a white costume now, Pete was focused on the stage from a short distance away. Maybe that getup was his attempt to fit in with the cheery mood?

“Oh, how very exciting! This year we have multiple winners. The Million Dreams Award goes to...Ventus, Aqua, and Terra. All three of you!”

Cheers erupted from everyone gathered before the stage. *Ven and Aqua came here, too?* Terra was sincerely pleased to share an award with them.

But then Pete pushed his way through and ran up on stage. “Wha...?! There’s gotta be a mistake. Everybody voted for Captain Justice. I made sure! Now, go on, tell her!” he shouted, but to no avail.

“Better try the other one...”

Briefly concealing himself off in the wings, Pete then emerged as the Captain Dark character Terra had seen before.

“The rogue racer, Captain Dark!”

Pete struck a pose, but no one paid him any mind.

As he shook with anger, Minnie said, “Pete, we counted the votes very carefully. Ventus, Aqua, and Terra won.” She then continued, more gently, “Oh, Pete, I think you tried to do something good, but you were doing it for the wrong reasons, and you went about it the wrong way. Still, some of the citizens must have thought you had goodness in you, because you actually got a few votes. They knew you were looking out for them.”

“Big whoop! I don’t need their lousy votes. Just cough up my prize!”

Minnie’s reassurances went to waste as Pete reached out toward her.

“Pete!” His hands froze at her stern tone, and Minnie continued. “They voted for you because they believe in you and care about you. How could you look down on that? I’ve tried to forgive a lot of things you’ve done, but this is too much. Now you’ve finally crossed the line.”

“Like that matters to me. Besides, what are you gonna do about it?” Pete blustered, turning away from her.

“Ha! I’m going to let you cool off for a while. Guards!” Minnie ordered.

Broom guards appeared from the edges of the square and surrounded him.

“W-wait, what?”

The brooms lifted Pete up and carried him away.

“Hey! Let me go!” Pete shouted in the distance, but eventually his cries faded out of hearing.

“Now, shall we continue the ceremony? Would the three winners—Ventus, Aqua, and Terra—please come up and join me on the stage?”

Terra stepped onto the stage, hoping the other two were there, too—but he didn’t see any sign of Ven or Aqua.

“Oh dear, it looks like our other two winners couldn’t make it here to be with us today.”

“Oh...”

Terra was disappointed. They must have already left.

“Perhaps you would accept the award on their behalf. After all, you’ve been so kind to so many here at the Dream Festival. So now, I hereby present the Million Dreams Award as a token of how much you matter to us. Congratulations!”

Once the smiling Minnie finished her accolade, everyone leaped up and down and showered him with applause.

“Thank you.”

“And as an extra treat, we’ve created something special—an ice cream flavor just for you: Rockin’ Crunch ice cream!”

Terra accepted the ice cream bar-shaped treat. Maybe the brown stuff was chocolate? He hadn’t eaten many sugary things before...

“Oh my, I wish I had my own ice cream flavor!”

“What’s it taste like?”

“Go on, try it!”

At the urging of the crowd, Terra took a bite of the frozen treat. The sweetness of caramel and the fragrance of nuts spread across his tongue.

“What do you think?”

“Mmm! This is fantastic!”

Terra nodded at Minnie’s question.

“We’re all very glad you’re enjoying it,” she said, and cheers again filled the plaza.

Right around then, Pete had been cast adrift in the Ocean Between, imprisoned far from the home he knew.

“Who does she think she is, dumpin’ me in a place like this? Well, I’ll just bust outta here and—”

Pete stamped his feet in frustration, but no way out was forthcoming.

He was there for what felt like an eternity. Maybe it was only an instant, or maybe it was years...but all he could do was bide his time and nurse his grudge against everyone in Disney Town.

Then, a voice distant and mysterious resounded from beyond the blackness.

“Quiet, fool! You do not possess that kind of power.”

“Who...who’s there? Show yourself!” Pete cried out in fear. That voice belonged to a woman, and was filled with indescribable malevolence.

“That is enough! Stop your sniveling and heed my words. If you do exactly as I say, I may decide to release you from this prison.”

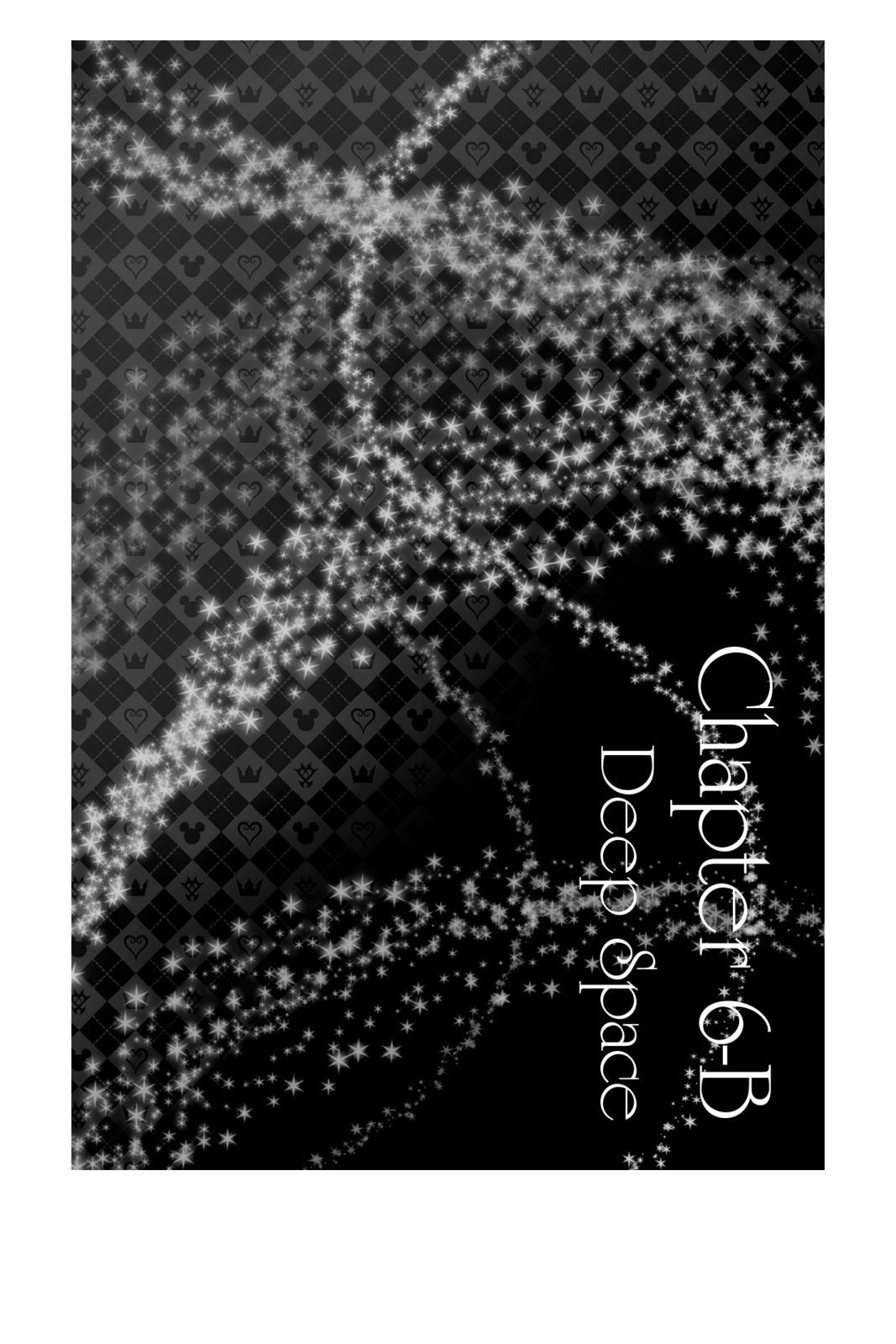
“Really?! Oh, then you can count on me. Just get me outta here, and you can tell me what to do!” Pete shouted to the owner of the voice.

“A very wise choice indeed. Now...proceed.”

Just then, swirling darkness unfurled before Pete. Where did it lead...?

“With your help, soon every world in existence will all be mine!”

Pete had no reason to decline the offer. He obediently stepped into the darkness in front of him and was spirited away to parts unknown.



Chapter 6-B

Deep Space

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Deep Space

“When I really need you, Ven, I know you’ll be there.”

Terra thought back on what he’d said to Ven. The path he was about to embark upon would take him in a different direction from Ven—no, from Ven and Aqua both.

His heart twinged with worry—if so, then his farewell with Ven might have been for good. He brought his Keyblade glider to a halt.

From beneath his armor, he pulled out the Wayfinder charm he had received from Aqua.

He must be crazy to still be holding on to his connection with them after parting with them the way he had.

Aqua had spied on him under orders from Master Eraqus. Neither the Master nor Aqua trusted him.

His chest ached.

All of that was precisely why he had followed Master Xehanort’s instructions to seek a balance of light and dark, and defeat Vanitas to that end. That ought to be his next goal, but those doubts just wouldn’t go away.

Terra tightened his hold on the Wayfinder charm—then noticed a strange scene before him.

“All the way out here?!”

His breath caught in his throat as he spotted the mob of Unversed floating in the interworld passage. What looked like more than a hundred mushroom-shaped monsters bobbed in space.

Terra repeatedly rammed his Keyblade through the horde, extinguishing their evil.

There were so many; it seemed there was no end to them. What had happened here? Vanitas needed to go down, and soon.

When there were about thirty or so Unversed left, a gigantic shadow crept up behind Terra as he plowed into the throng.

Just ten more.

Terra finished off the last of the pack.

And then, space-time itself warped thanks to the gravitational

force of a massive spaceship.

Terra and his Keyblade were sucked into the spacefaring hulk.

Small rooms with large doors of hard glass stood all in a row in the hushed Turo prison block. Terra had been laid out on a bed inside one of them.

Two sets of footsteps broke the silence.

"Is he the one?" Terra heard a woman ask.

"Yes, Grand Councilwoman. I've confined him until we can determine what he is," a man replied.

Who did these voices belong to?

Terra stirred on the cold bed. He thought he heard some sort of commotion...?

"Take cover! Leave it to me to handle these fiends!" the man shouted, pulling Terra out of his reverie. He glanced out through the glass.

"Unversed!!"

There were two figures surrounded by a pack of Unversed. The masculine-looking one, Captain Gantu, battled the creatures with a gun in one hand.

"Whatever you are, you're under arrest...eventually!"

Gantu fled from the passage while shielding his companion, the Grand Councilwoman. Opening the glass door with his Keyblade, Terra rushed out into the corridor to find his path blocked by the Unversed.

"I'll give ya a fight."

The beasts fell easily to Terra's Keyblade. Their numbers weren't anything to bat an eye at compared to the swarm he had just fought. After doing away with several of them, Terra paused for a breath.

"Very impressive display."

Turning at the voice, Terra found a solitary figure watching him through the glass of a cramped cell, apparently locked up just as he had been.

Judging by the horizontal stripes on his clothes, he was likely a prisoner. When Terra made to walk off, the voice called after him.

"Wait! You help! I have been imprisoned on ridiculous charges!"

"Ridiculous charges?" That made it difficult to leave him.

"I am innocent scientist who created galaxy's most destructive—uh...constructive species of all times. Why, my experiment could annihilate creatures you fought so hard!"

A species that could oppose the Unversed? Was that even possible to create?

"He is bulletproof, fireproof, and can think faster than

supercomputer. He can see in the dark and move objects three thousand times his rather diminutive size,” the prisoner rattled off in one breath, turning away from Terra.

“And for reasons preposterous, the Federation Council fears him. They take him away from me and throw me in small, stuffy, rather badly lit cell.”

“Because he’s so powerful?”

“Exactly. Everyone always gets antsy in pantses when somebody more powerful is in the neighborhood. You understand, perhaps?”

It reminded Terra of something Master Xehanort had said.

“You are the one who shows the true Mark of Mastery, but he refuses to see it. And I know why. It is because he fears you.”

Being alienated because you were strong—Terra could sympathize.

“We must make to rescue him, or he’ll be banished to far reaches of space!”

“Okay, then. Take me to him.”

Terra approached and held out his Keyblade toward the door of the cell, undoing the electronic lock. Its occupant walked out and said to Terra, “Experiment Six-Two-Six.” The words were unfamiliar to him. “Is name I give to adorable, fluffy creature you are helping for rescue. And I am genius scientist who created him, Dr. Jumba Jookiba.”

“I’m Terra.”

“Pleasure is all ours. Six-Two-Six is this way. Hurry!”

The two of them left the prison block.

Beyond the rather large room was a small, circular chamber. A device was installed in its center.

“What type of world is this?”

“Currently, we are on Planet Turo. We take teleporter to Durgon prison transport ship and Six-Two-Six.”

“Okay.”

So that big ship had sucked him up and brought him here to this planet.

“Now, this way.”

With the help of the teleporter, they infiltrated the ship. When they tried to proceed further, they found the way blocked by Unversed.

“They’re here, too!”

Putting Jumba behind him, Terra started cutting his way through the Unversed until he realized it would probably be better for his companion to run than get caught up in a drawn-out battle.

“Which way to his containment pod?”

“Over here.”

“Let’s go!”

Terra dashed into another chamber with Jumba, but the ship corridor leading to the containment pod was lousy with Unversed, too.

“Why there so many creatures...?” Jumba cocked his head in puzzlement.

“We don’t have time to worry about that now,” Terra urged. He ran down the passageway, taking down Unversed along the way.

“Wait.” Terra noticed Jumba fiddling with something that looked like an electronic lock next to a door. “I’ll open it.”

He raised his Keyblade to the lock, and it silently opened. Terra and Jumba quickly slid into the room.

“This is—”

In the middle of the chamber was something resembling a small glass capsule between two mechanical arms in the ceiling, apparently protecting it. And within the capsule was a growling blue creature with four arms, about the same size as a human child—Experiment 626.

“Amazing, is he not? Such tremendous power in such itty-bitty package.” Jumba pointed out his creation to Terra. “Truly, he is the one and the only—the mightiest creature in all of galaxy. And his only, singular instinct—to destroy everything he touches! See?”

Jumba twisted around the capsule and undid the lock. With the capsule containing him gone, Experiment 626 scanned his surroundings in surprise before springing onto Terra’s shoulder.

“What?!”

After scampering all over Terra’s body for a moment, Experiment 626 leaped away and scampered up the wall. Clutched in one of its paws was Terra’s Wayfinder charm.

“When did you—? Give that back!”

As Terra reached out for Experiment 626, Jumba remarked, “Too late, is already marked for destruction.”

“No, stop! My friend gave me that!” Feeling his chest tighten, Terra yelled at Experiment 626—and something occurred to him.

“*My friend gave me that*,” he’d said. Did he believe their connection was unbroken after all...?

Experiment 626 stared at the amulet while Terra hesitated.

“‘Friend’? Are you joking?” Jumba guffawed. “Such concept is totally lost on Six-Two-Six!”

Experiment 626 gazed intently at the pendant for a bit before tossing it aside and scurrying off, as if something else had caught its attention.

Terra picked up the amulet that had fallen to the floor.

An unbreakable connection...

He never would have expected something like this to show him

how he really felt. He'd been too fixated on his mission and the power to accomplish it, and that was the source of his misgivings. What his heart truly yearned for was that bond with his friends.

He turned to Jumba.

"That experiment of yours...you sure about him? Maybe, in his heart, he wants friends just like the rest of us."

"Impossible! Pshah! He has no actual feelings, only destructive instincts I have carefully chosen for him. Or perhaps you need another demonstration of my evil geniusness!"

Jumba removed a small, shiny green ball from his pocket and put it in a flask of liquid. As the orb in the flask was engulfed in light, a golden creature that bore a strong resemblance to Experiment 626 popped out.

"Behold! One of my other six hundred and twenty-five creations: Experiment Two-Two-One!"

After jumping around the room for a bit, Experiment 221 suddenly shot an arc of electricity at Terra. He wasn't really in the mood to fight—but if the creature was attacking, he didn't have a whole lot of options. After scoping out the situation, Terra edged up to Experiment 221 with Keyblade in hand to accept the challenge. Nimble avoiding the Keyblade, Experiment 221 slid toward the core at the center, between the two arms where Experiment 626's capsule had been, and the arms became blasters firing red balls at Terra.

"Guess I'll have to take those out first!"

He leaped upward and hammered the blasters repeatedly in midair with his Keyblade. After a bit of a struggle, the arms finally ceased functioning. Experiment 221 was then ejected from its hiding place.

"Sorry 'bout this," Terra grunted as he swung his Keyblade before it could figure out what happened. The powerful blow stopped Experiment 221 in its tracks and sent it tumbling to the floor—where it transformed back into the green ball from before.

"Oh...You'll be all right, little one."

Behind Jumba, who was on his hands and knees in obvious distress, Experiment 626 appeared.

"What is it? Why have you returned?" Jumba was perplexed.

Experiment 626 babbled incomprehensibly at the scientist, but Terra had a feeling he understood what it was trying to say. He stepped closer. "Maybe he's wondering what a friend is."

"Ridiculous!"

Terra ignored Jumba and stood before Experiment 626. "My name is Terra."

"Ter...ra..." Experiment 626 tilted its head as it repeated the name.

“Yes. I can’t explain friendship. When you feel it, you’ll know it,” Terra advised—until Jumba cut him off.

“Not if I have any say in matter! You are only meant to think about what it is you will destroy next. Now, I fix what is wrong with you,” Jumba ordered, but Experiment 626 growled and yelped in protest. Just then, the security alarm went off, and the light in the room began flashing red.

“Red alert. Red alert. Experiment Six-Two-Six and two prisoners have escaped from the cell bay. Security, locate the fugitives immediately. Repeat. Experiment Six-Two-Six and—”

Though it was debatable whether it understood the announcement, Experiment 626 left the room.

“Not so fast!”

Jumba went after him. Though Terra was worried about Experiment 626, he decided against pursuing the creature.

Now alone, Terra returned to his senses and noticed the Wayfinder charm he still had in his hand.

Ven, Aqua—are we still connected? No, I don’t have to think about it, just feel it in my heart. We might be walking separate paths now, but our friendship is still here. I want to trust in that, but why can’t I be sure?

Terra’s grip on the amulet tightened.

He had to track down Vanitas soon...After a pause, Terra bid farewell to this world.

A massive horde of Unversed trailed after Vanitas like a parade. He strutted through the ship, then gave a big stretch, bored out of his mind.

“Red alert. Red alert. Experiment Six-Two-Six and two prisoners have escaped from the cell bay. Security, locate the fugitives immediately. Repeat. Experiment Six-Two-Six and—”

Vanitas snorted derisively at the announcement and flashing red lights. He knew Terra had already snuck into this world. While Vanitas had no idea where he was or what he was up to, Terra didn’t interest him much—not to mention he was Master Xehanort’s, anyway.

“Now then, what to do...,” Vanitas murmured, then spotted a small creature up ahead that seemed to be putting together some junk. The creature, Experiment 626, noticed Vanitas and bared its teeth at him with a snarl. Intrigued, he reached out for Experiment 626’s precious garbage.

“What do we have here?”

Experiment 626 leaped away as the boy tried to snatch the object. Now with a little more distance between them, the experiment

growled again. The garbage was actually a bunch of scrap pieced together in a rough approximation of a flower. Vanitas remembered that Ventus had something similar. This little critter must have made its own version for whatever reason.

And the fact that it actually made Vanitas feel something was just more proof that he and Ventus were connected.

“...This is ridiculous.”

Vanitas turned his back on Experiment 626 and walked off.

The next place Aqua visited after departing Disney Town was the interior of a gigantic ship traveling through the Lanes Between—this was Deep Space.

Was Terra in this world?

The view beyond the colossal window was a little different from usual. Aqua abruptly felt the arrival of something behind her and spun around.

“Is there any world they haven’t found?”

Aqua quickly readied her Keyblade and began fighting them. This world was rampant with Unversed, too. Anxiety raced through Aqua’s chest as she disposed of the beasts one after the other. She didn’t know why the Unversed existed, but seeing this many varieties meant there was something very wrong in this world.

“Is that...all of them?” Aqua muttered upon defeating the last of the Unversed—at least as far as she could tell. She put away her Keyblade, then noticed something lying in the middle of the room.

“This is...”

What she scooped up was an object with five “petals” of metal scrap. The shape was very familiar to her.

Just then, a blue shadow swept in front of her and snatched away the object.

Instinctively bringing up her Keyblade, Aqua found a small blue creature with four arms before her.

The creature had the object in its paws, snarling at her menacingly.

“Tell me, where did you get that?” she asked, and the creature seemed to notice something.

Is it looking at my Keyblade...? Maybe it met Terra or Ven?

Aqua was about to ask when a masculine voice thundered, “Come out, you little trog!”

Hearing the voice, the blue critter leaped away and scampered off through what looked like a vent in the ceiling.

“Wait!”

When Aqua tried to give chase, a huge man, Gantu, blocked her

path.

"You there. Has Experiment Six-Two-Six passed through this area?"

"Experiment what?"

Was that the name of that blue creature?

The man pressed further when she tilted her head in puzzlement.

"Don't be dense. Dr. Jumba Jookiba's genetic abomination—Six-Two-Six! Small? Blue? Vicious?"

The creature she saw just now hadn't appeared vicious in the slightest.

"Do you know something?"

"Yes, he's in the ventilation system." Aqua pointed to the vent honestly.

"Blast! He got away again," Gantu grumbled, seeming near the end of his rope. He took a step to return to the hunt, but then he stopped. "Hold it right there. Why don't I know you? What section are you from?"

"I'm, uh..." She didn't know what to tell him.

"Trying to stow away, are we? Come with me."

What should I do? Just run?

As Aqua deliberated, she heard a woman's voice.

"What is the meaning of this? Captain Gantu, did I not order you to apprehend the fugitives immediately?"

They were in a room off the passage. There was an array of large computers—this must be some sort of control room.

"Yes—and I will have them in custody soon. They'd be locked up already if those wretched monsters would just—I mean, if I hadn't uncovered this potential stowaway."

This woman he called the Grand Councilwoman seemed much more reasonable than Gantu. Aqua stepped toward her.

"I wasn't trying to sneak on board. My name is Aqua. And those monsters—I followed them here. Please, I can handle this threat. Just give me a chance. Let me show you. The weapon I carry is the only one that can stop them," she rapidly explained.

The Grand Councilwoman appeared surprised for a moment, then asked Gantu a question.

"Our weapons are of no use against them? Is this true?"

"Well, we haven't explored all our options—" Gantu replied unhappily.

"Nor do we have time to," the Grand Councilwoman interrupted, eyeing Aqua. "We are fortunate you are here, Aqua," she said to her. "Your assistance would be most welcome."

"But Grand Councilwoman, you can't honestly believe what this stowaway says?" Gantu interjected.

“I think you’ll find that I can. We have a crisis. Jumba and Six-Two-Six remain at large, and these monsters are obstructing attempts to apprehend them. Or did I mishear your latest excuse as to why you’ve again failed to carry out your duties, Captain?” The Grand Councilwoman admonished him before returning her attention to Aqua. “Will you help us?”

“Of course. Defeating them is my job. It’s what I do best, ma’am.” Aqua nodded resolutely.

“Then might I make one other request? Should you happen upon our fugitives, please do whatever you can to apprehend them intact.”

The Grand Councilwoman turned away, and an image appeared on the monitor in front of her. The blue creature from before, Experiment 626, and another man were on it.

“Those monsters are keeping us from conducting our search in a satisfactory manner.”

“You want me to capture Dr. Jumba and Experiment Six-Two-Six?”

“But you can’t just—That’s my job!”

The Grand Councilwoman again shook her head. “You had your chance, Captain Gantu. Now you will stand down and await orders.”

Gantu grumbled incoherently.

“We will monitor the location of the monsters and keep you apprised. Thank you for your help, Aqua.”

“Of course.”

After replying to the Grand Councilwoman, Aqua passed by the furiously trembling Gantu and set off to exterminate the Unversed. What concerned her most was that object in Experiment 626’s paws.

She’d know that shape anywhere—did that Wayfinder facsimile mean Terra or Ven was somewhere in this world?

Aqua proceeded through the vessel, defeating any Unversed that reared their heads. After passing by several rooms, she arrived at a small, round chamber.

There was a device in the center of the room with a platform just big enough for a single person. When she pressed the activation switch next to it, Aqua instantly warped to another chamber. Beyond the door were many small rooms in rows.

And as she walked in, there was Experiment 626.

The creature seemed to be searching for something, but the appearance of Unversed cut its efforts short.

“Look out!”

Aqua did away with the Unversed around Experiment 626 with a sweep of her Keyblade.

The little creature peered up at her.

“You must be Experiment Six-Two-Six. I have orders to take you in,” she told it.

“Terra,” it replied.

“What?” she asked, but Experiment 626 just scuttled off. “I think you and I need to talk.”

Aqua tried to get it to stop as she gave chase, only to have more Unversed appear and block the way. It seemed any progress would happen after she dealt with them.

“But first things first,” she muttered.

In front of Aqua, Experiment 626 bared its fangs and pounced. Aqua joined it, charging into the pack, and disposed of them one after the other. From what she could see from the corner of her eye, Experiment 626 was quite formidable.

An Unversed lunged at her from behind while she was distracted by Experiment 626.

“—!”

With a snarl, Experiment 626 bounded through the air, harried the Unversed with its sharp claws, and landed as if nothing had happened.

“Thanks, I owe you.”

Aqua expressed her gratitude, but the little guy just began its search again. When Aqua finished off the final Unversed, she walked up to Experiment 626.

“What is it you’re looking for?” she asked.

Experiment 626 turned back and paused in thought for a moment.

“...Ter...ra.”

Terra’s name again.

But then it scampered off just like before.

“Wait! I just need to ask you...”

Six-Two-Six scuttled up a pillar and disappeared without even turning back. Aqua had no choice but to go after him again.

She left the large chamber and took the teleporter back to the ship.

Aqua’s foot bumped against something small as she made her way back toward the Grand Councilwoman to debrief and get more information. It was that makeshift Wayfinder she had seen during her initial encounter with Experiment 626. Aqua picked it up.

Experiment 626 had seemed to value it highly. And it had mentioned Terra’s name.

What exactly did it know?

Aqua stepped into the command room with the object in hand.

“Your Highness—”

“Dr. Jumba and Experiment Six-Two-Six have been sighted,” said

the Grand Councilwoman. "At that time, the two of them were wandering around the launch deck. Would you see that they're secured?"

Aqua lowered her gaze for a moment, then made up her mind to ask. "Is Experiment Six-Two-Six...really that dangerous of a creature?"

It didn't seem that way to her at all. Six-Two-Six had helped her battle the Unversed.

"We must assume so."

The Grand Councilwoman's response was brief and to the point. Plus, it didn't seem that she was lying.

"All right, then. I'll head over there now."

Aqua departed for the launch deck with the object in hand.

At the launch deck, she found who she assumed to be Dr. Jumba conversing with Experiment 626.

"Is time to give up. Then I will fix abnormality, and ridiculous behavior stops."

But Experiment 626 growled defiantly.

"Hold it right there! Dr. Jumba, Experiment Six-Two-Six...I've been authorized to take you into custody," she called. The duo turned toward Aqua.

"Terra!"

Experiment 626 reacted to the object in Aqua's hand. Immediately after, he snatched the item away from her with a swift motion.

"So it really does belong to you," she said as it rubbed the object against its cheek in obvious pleasure. "But...where have you seen that shape?"

Jumba answered her question instead. "Is copy he made of good luck charm that boy Terra show to him. Terra said friend gave him charm, was very protective of it."

So Terra was here...

"He really said that to you?" she asked.

"Yes." Jumba nodded in affirmation.

Relief filled her chest. Terra still felt their bond.

"And now, because of Terra and his little bauble...my genius creation is hesitating in his genetically programmed destructive instincts. Just look at him."

As Jumba elaborated, a beam of light struck near Experiment 626's feet and damaged the floor.

"What are you doing?! Our orders are to capture them alive!" Aqua shouted.

"I've decided to take a new approach," Gantu replied, holding a blaster. "All right, you two...Any last words before I blast you into a

million pieces?"

Experiment 626 angrily yelled back at the captain using some words Aqua couldn't understand.

"I am just big-boned! Freeze!" Gantu drove Experiment 626 up against a wall.

"Stop it!" Aqua came running up with her Keyblade.

But Gantu turned toward her and barked. "I warned you. Stay out of it!" This was unusual for him.

"I guess we have to do this the hard way," Aqua said, resigned.

Experiment 626 let out a roar, and Gantu chose that moment to fire off several beams in rapid succession. Aqua and 626 charged toward Gantu at nearly the same time. Experiment 626 darted around him and got a few swipes in, while Aqua leaped upward with her Keyblade to go on the attack.

She could sense a connection building between her and Experiment 626 as they fought together.

Was this their bond? They had only just met, but she could feel something between her and 626.

Aqua landed the final strike to Gantu alongside Experiment 626.

Gantu dropped to a knee. "I'm not done with you yet."

However a voice interjected. "Enough!"

It was the Grand Councilwoman.

"I observed everything on the monitor."

"I—"

However, the Grand Councilwoman walked right by Gantu as he tried to explain and stopped before Aqua.

"You've been of great service, Aqua. Thank you. Captain Gantu. Escort Six-Two-Six to the asteroid to which he's been banished. When you return, you're back on patrol."

"Not patrol!" Gantu sagged dejectedly.

The Grand Councilwoman then began to walk off, accompanied by Dr. Jumba and Experiment 626.

"Please, Your Highness. Would you consider sparing Experiment Six-Two-Six?" Aqua asked the Grand Councilwoman's back.

"Spare him? He's an extremely dangerous creature. I cannot release such a menace." She stopped and turned around at Aqua's request.

"But it seems to me he's at least trying to make friends. And dangerous or not...I really believe he can succeed."

"Very well, Aqua. If he behaves himself, I will consider shortening his exile."

"Thank you, ma'am." Aqua bowed to the Grand Councilwoman, then walked up to Experiment 626 and knelt down. She placed her hand on the object he was holding.

“I like the charm you made. Do you think...my circle of friends could become part of yours?”

Experiment 626 looked up at Aqua with a puzzled expression.

“My name is Aqua. My friends are Terra and Ventus.”

“Ah-kwah, fren...Terra...Ven.”

Aqua studied Experiment 626 for a moment, then smiled and stood up. Still carrying his trinket, Experiment 626 walked toward the Grand Councilwoman and Gantu.

Aqua was sure the Grand Councilwoman would keep her promise. Her chest grew warm. Experiment 626 had helped assure her of her bond to Terra.

Terra will be okay. We're connected, after all.

And with that, Aqua put Deep Space behind her.

What kind of friends would he make in the next world?

First Lea, then Herc, and then Huey, Dewey, and Louie. *I've made so many friends already.*

Ven remembered the people he had met in the previous worlds as he raced along on his Keyblade glider. And then there was the Wayfinder in his pocket. Maybe he just wanted more and more friends because Terra and Aqua had been there with him all along.

Something large and white approached Ven from behind.

“Huh? What’s that?”

What slid by was...

“An Unversed!”

The big, jellyfish-shaped Unversed, Metamorphosis, swam leisurely through the Lanes Between. Tentacles unfurled in three directions from its bell-shaped body and poised in wait for Ven.

“Here I come!”

He accelerated his Keyblade and rammed into Metamorphosis as hard as he could, and it flapped off in escape.

“Wait!”

Quite a ways ahead of the Unversed and its pursuer was a vessel even more massive than the creature.

“Tryin’ to catch a ride, huh?”

Ven stayed hot on its tail for a good while, but he was ultimately unable to catch up before it disappeared into the colossal ship, leaving him to barge in after it.

Around that time, Experiment 626 had been re-confined in the containment pod. Security was heavier than before, with 626

restrained inside a capsule installed between blasters protruding like two arms from the ceiling.

“Now don’t get any more ideas,” Gantu stated forcefully as he looked up at Experiment 626. The creature growled at him.

At that moment, the alarm sounded.

“An intruder?!” Gantu shot another hard look at Experiment 626 and said, “All right, you. Don’t get any funny ideas!”

With that, he quickly left the containment pod.

Now that he was alone, Experiment 626 spat on the floor. The blasters, locked on to his DNA, honed their sights and attacked the glob of spittle. The impact broke the wall.

Then, Experiment 626 used his strength to escape from his restraints.

Dodging the series of beams from the blasters, he bolted from the containment pod.

The blaring alarms inside the ship sure made everything tense. Ven didn’t know if it was himself or the Unversed he was after that had triggered it.

“So you’re the intruder. Identify yourself.”

Having been classified as a trespasser, Ven turned around to see a mountain of a man, Gantu, towering over him with a ray gun in one hand.

“My name is Ventus. The monster I was chasing boarded your ship.”

“Nice try. If there was another intruder aboard, we’d have detected it.”

Ven’s honesty did him no good—this guy wasn’t going to listen either way. But then the alarm sounded again.

“Intruder in the machinery bay! We lost control of the engines! I-it’s some kind of monster!”

“Now you tell me!” Gantu turned away from Ven and took off in a hurry. “Stay right there! I have lots of unpleasant questions to ask you.”

Despite Gantu’s instructions, Ven wasn’t about to just sit around and wait. *It’s probably my fault it ended up on the ship at all*, Ven thought. He started after Gantu, but then a blue creature jumped out in front of him.

The blue creature, Experiment 626, regarded Ven, then spoke very slowly. “Ven...? Terra...Ah-kwah...”

Despite being in the midst of an emergency, the startled Ven asked this little newcomer, “What? You know Terra and Aqua?”

Experiment 626 quickly showed him an item that looked just like

a Wayfinder charm.

“Fren...Circle!”

“Hey...is that a Wayfinder?!”

Ven approached 626 to see it closer.

Just then, the ship rumbled with a loud noise.

“The engines are under too much stress. We’re risking an explosion!”

An extremely anxious voice resounded from the ship-wide announcement system.

“What am I doing? There’s no time!”

Ven began to run, and Experiment 626 tagged along. Ven noticed and stopped. Turning back, he bent down and told him, “No! You need to stay here. It’s too dangerous.”

He took off again.

Now alone, Experiment 626 looked quietly at the object. It was his treasure, the charm he’d made in imitation of the one Terra had also valued so highly. “Aqua” and “Ven”—the two words were the names of some important people Terra had taught him about. But Ven had gone on ahead.

Friends—circle.

A flash from a blaster struck Experiment 626 in the paw as he started walking. Six-Two-Six was fine even after the impact sent him flying, but the object he had been holding broke into pieces.

“I don’t know how you did it, but you won’t get away again.”

It was Gantu. Experiment 626 growled.

“Hmph. You haven’t fooled me. You can bat your eyes all you want at the Grand Councilwoman so she’ll reconsider your sentence. But I see you for what you really are—an abomination that’s only instinct is to destroy everything it touches.”

Gantu approached Experiment 626, firing his blaster. Six-Two-Six leaped out of the way and collided hard with the wall. Part of it crumbled.

“You—!” As Gantu fired a barrage, Experiment 626 started to attack, but then disappeared into the hole in the wall with a huge leap.

Ven arrived at the machinery bay, defeating smaller Unversed as he went. The target of his pursuit—Metamorphosis—was circling the engine there.

“End of the line!”

Ven brought his Keyblade up into a fighting stance, only for the ceiling to explode with a tremendous noise, and Experiment 626 plopped down. Before them, Metamorphosis watched the pair from above, undulating its jellyfish-like bell.

“Hey! You shouldn’t be here.”

Experiment 626 merely yapped as if he couldn’t hear Ven.

Something seemed strange.

“What is it?”

Six-Two-Six made even more of a fuss, but Ven didn’t have time to deal with him just then. Metamorphosis had latched onto the engine, dimming all the lights in the ship.

“Get off there!”

Ven leaped and launched an aerial attack against the Unversed. Experiment 626 followed suit. Once Metamorphosis was separated from the engine, the lights returned to normal. The two would need to keep it safe during the battle. Something was still off about Experiment 626, but he at least seemed to recognize Metamorphosis as the enemy.

“—Let’s do this!”

Ven hurled his Keyblade at the Unversed, damaging it, but the thing wasn’t going down that easy. Experiment 626 jumped in and rammed into Metamorphosis.

“Nice one!”

Next Ven dashed in and dealt another blow. Perhaps Experiment 626 had hit it harder than he thought, because their foe finally ceased moving.

When 626 followed up with a succession of laser blasts, Metamorphosis finally gave up the ghost.

“You’re pretty tough.”

Experiment 626 continued snarling, completely unaware of Ven’s approach. He fired off beams into space.

“It’s over! Cut it out!”

Six-Two-Six still didn’t calm down. Ven grabbed him from behind to try and make him be still, but the little creature whacked him away.

“Whoa!”

At Ven’s cry as he went sailing through the air, Experiment 626 quieted down. The growling ceased.

“What’s gotten into you?”

His big ears dropping, Experiment 626 showed Ven the broken item as the boy sat up.

“I see...Your Wayfinder broke. Well, don’t worry. Friendship’s more than an object.”

Right, friendship wasn’t something you could hold in your hand.

It was all around you.

“Frenship...Cir...cle?”

“Yeah!”

Experiment 626 seemed to grin at Ven’s affirmation.

“Hmph, don’t let the little mimic fool you. You saw for yourself what kind of monster that thing is. All it knows how to do is hurt and destroy.”

“Monster? He helped me *stop* the monster!” Ven shouted as he shielded Experiment 626 from Gantu’s gun.

“You must have triggered some sort of mutation hidden in the little freak’s genetic coding.”

“Ven. Fren!” This time Experiment 626’s meaning was clear.

“That’s right. We are friends!” Ven responded with a smile.

Gantu turned his weapon on Ven.

“Better say your good-byes now, then, because Six-Two-Six is about to be destroyed!”

As soon as the words were out of Gantu’s mouth, Experiment 626 pounced on his face. He then bounded away from the stunned captain and started babbling.

“Okay!” Ven replied, then sprinted after the fleeing Experiment 626.

“Sound the alert! Prisoners on the loose! Don’t let them get away!” Gantu shouted at their backs. He didn’t try to catch them, though.

Experiment 626 was headed for the launch deck. He climbed into one of the several small craft parked there.

“C’mom!”

Ven put on his armor and hopped onto his Keyblade glider.

The two of them shot out into space at nearly the same time. But a group of fighters was immediately on 626’s tail.

“Where are we going?” asked Ven when he drew near 626’s ship. The little guy said something back, but Ven didn’t understand. Their pursuers were tightening the net around them. Experiment 626 hurriedly pulled a switch in the cockpit.

“Hyperdrive has been activated. System charging. Warning. Guidance is not functional. Navigation failure. Do not engage hyperdrive.”

The voice coming from the cockpit traveled via the radio waves and reached the ships chasing them.

“Break formation! Get clear!”

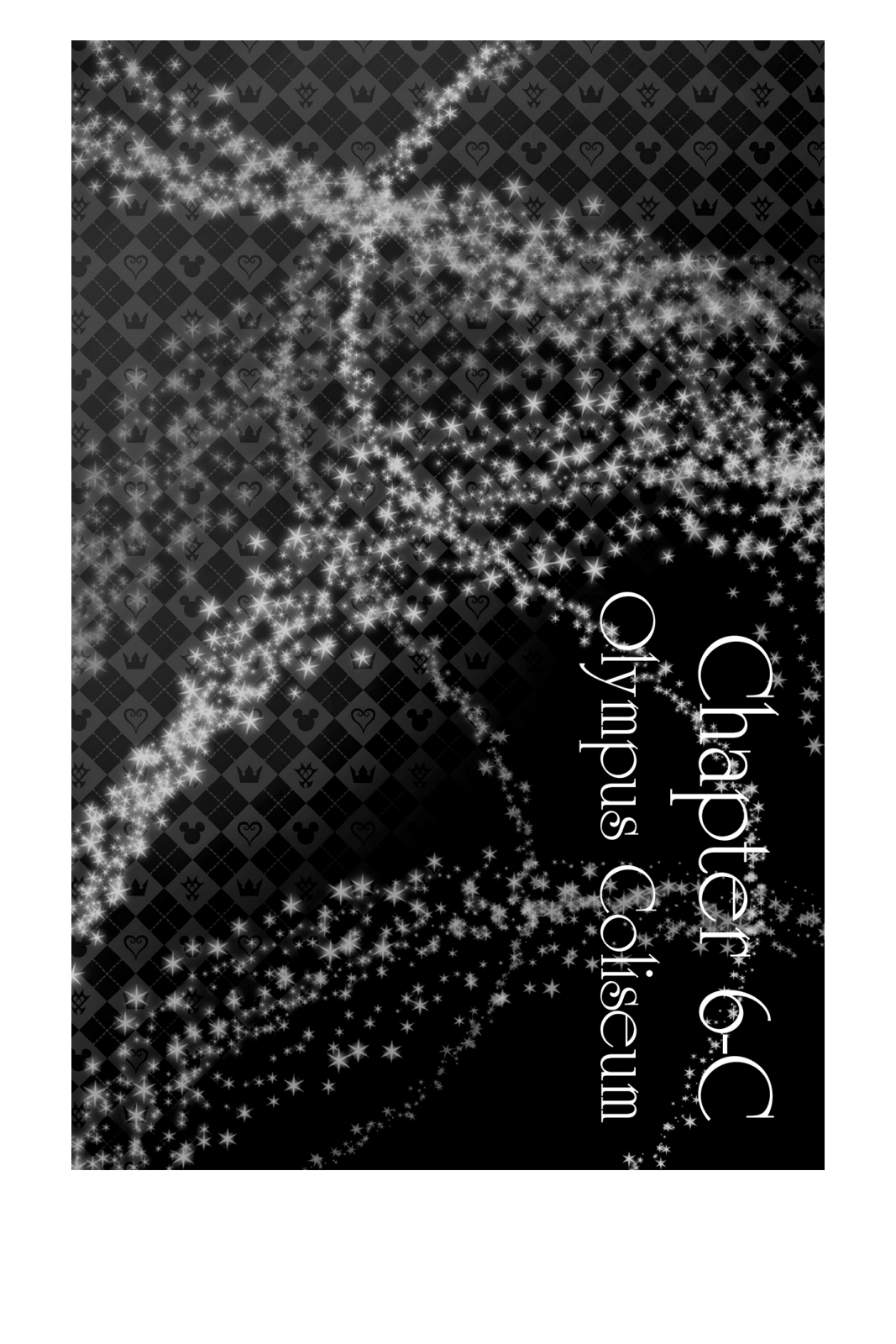
The ships rapidly dispersed.

“What is it? What’s going on?” Ven called to Experiment 626, but the creature just shook his head and yelled. Ven got nearer to try and hear him better, but the ship suddenly blasted off in a burst of light.

The shock wave sent Ven and his Keyblade flying.

“Vennn!”

Experiment 626 shouted, and then they both were gone.



Chapter 6-C

Olympus Coliseum

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Olympus Coliseum

AFTER LEAVING DEEP SPACE, TERRA RETURNED ONCE MORE TO THE LANES BETWEEN.

Where should he go next?

Before he could decide on a destination, a lone world appeared before him. If he was going to put an end to Vanitas, Terra had no choice but to scour every place he came across. He had become aware of how he felt about his friends in Deep Space. Though their goals had diverged, a bond still existed among him, Ven, and Aqua.

Terra urged his Keyblade glider on toward the world up ahead.

He landed in something like a forum, in the center of which a lone boy was facing off against a pack of Unversed.

Or trying to; the Unversed swatted the boy away, sending him tumbling to the ground. Though he struggled with all his might to get to his feet, the boy didn't seem to stand a chance. Terra planted himself between the boy and the monsters, readying his Keyblade.

"Stay back."

With that warning, Terra threw himself into the midst of the Unversed. His Keyblade flashed, laying waste to them. The boy stood behind Terra and watched with sparkling blue eyes as Terra demolished the Unversed without taking so much as a scratch.

Once he had subdued the monsters and put away his Keyblade, Terra turned to the boy.

"You okay?"

Taking the hand Terra extended to him, the boy got to his feet. "Yeah, thanks." He smiled and turned his head. "Phew, guess they were too much for me. I'm just gonna have to train harder," he said almost to himself, then asked Terra a question. "You're pretty tough—really handled those things. Are you here to enter the Games?"

"What games?" Terra asked in return.

"The 'Games' games," the boy replied. "To see who's strongest. One day I'm gonna win 'em all and become a true hero."

Games to see who was strongest...?

Terra wanted to know more about this contest, but then a voice called in the distance.

“Herc, where are ya? Front and center right now, or I’m tackin’ on another thousand laps!”

“Uh-oh, gotta go.” The boy—Hercules, also known as Herc—ran off toward the voice. “The Coliseum’s just up ahead. I hope I get to see you fight there sometime!”

As he watched the boy go on his way, Terra thought:

A competition to test your strength? Sounds interesting.

I want to know just how powerful I am.

After he’d parted ways with Aqua and Ven, Terra had been able to sense that he was still connected to the two of them in Deep Space after his meeting with Experiment 626.

That was all the more reason why he wanted to see once more how best to wield his own strength. How best to channel the power of darkness.

Terra slowly walked in the direction of the Coliseum.

Where could he have gone—?

Ven had left Radiant Garden, but he was unsure of his next destination. He stopped his Keyblade glider and fell into thought in the Lanes Between.

He didn’t know where Terra was now. Plus, after his bout with Lea, Ven had spent quite a bit of time getting to know him.

His best option was probably to just go to whatever worlds he spotted.

Ven urged on his Keyblade, set on visiting the first new world he came across.

The world where Ven eventually disembarked was Olympus Coliseum.

As its name would suggest, it was home to a coliseum.

No sooner had he taken in his surroundings than Ven noticed a diminutive man running by behind him.

This was soon after Terra had set out for the Coliseum.

“Oi! The kid’s relentless!”

As the little man grumbled, Ven called out to him.

“Hey, whatcha doin’ there?”

“Ahh!” The man jumped into the air in surprise, then whirled around and gave Ven what for. “I told ya, I’m booked solid. N-O spells forget it!”

Ven cocked his head to the side. What was that all about?

“Huh? And who in Halicarnassus are you? Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“Hey, Phil! I’m all signed up! Phil!”

As soon as the man—Phil—had finished ranting, a boy came running in their direction.

“All right, Herc, I hear ya! Now would ya keep it down already,” Phil quietly implored the boy called Herc. He appeared to be trying to escape from someone.

Just then, someone called from a short distance away.

“Aha!” The owner of the ecstatic voice was dressed as a soldier, with a helmet and longsword on his back.

“Beautiful...You happy now? You blew my cover!” Phil complained while the warrior approached with a grin.

“Okay, fess up. I asked around, and everybody says you’re the guy. The trainer of heroes!”

“True heroes!” Herc corrected.

“Really? You can teach that?” It sounded so cool that Ven had to ask.

“Course he can,” the warrior replied, then turned to Phil. “C’mon, Phil, please. I really wanna be a hero.”

“Look, we’ve been through this...I got two words for you: student-teacher ratio!” Phil declared—but wait, *was* that two words? Or was it three? Ven’s fingers curled down to count it out. But then Phil began trudging off, prompting Herc to do the same. “I already got my hands full with this one. C’mon, Herc.”

“I’m low-maintenance, I swear!” The warrior trailed after Phil and Herc.

It was at that moment that the Unversed materialized to surround Phil and Herc.

“Unversed!” Ven immediately readied his Keyblade and charged.

“Monsters, huh...? Hey, Phil! Watch this! I’ll show ya what I’m made of.” The warrior followed his lead.

“And I’ll help, too!” Herc clenched his fists. Phil took that opening to escape.

With three of them, this was going to be an easy battle. That armor in Radiant Garden was no joke, but Ven, Terra, and Aqua had still managed to come out on top. It was with some pleasure that Ven rushed at the pack of Unversed. He swung his Keyblade around, dispersing the beasts. He could see the warrior doing away with Unversed in a similar fashion out of the corner of his eye, and Herc was—Huh? Was he not very strong?

“Ack!”

Ven had been so busy watching the other two that he took the full

brunt of an Unversed attack and flew through the air. He immediately jumped to his feet, and used the momentum for a fatal counterattack.

That looked to be the last Unversed in his vicinity. The warrior and Herc were each squaring off with a single monster. The warrior finished off his final opponent, and Herc managed to take his down as well.

“Heh-heh...” Herc laughed bashfully.

Phil let out a sigh as he returned and gave a small shake of his head. “Okay...Change of plans.”

Now that Phil wasn't going to run away again, the warrior took a hopeful step forward.

“The Games are comin' up. So, I'm gonna watch both of your matches...then I'll decide which of you rookies I wanna train.”

“Sweet! Thank you, thank you! I'm gonna go sign up right now.” The warrior ran off jubilantly.

These Games could be interesting.

“The Games, huh? Sounds fun!”

When Ven followed suit, Phil put the damper on him with a single sentence.

“Sorry kid. Captain Eager there just took the last spot.”

Aw, man...

Behind Ven as he came to a dejected halt, Herc protested. “I don't understand! Phil, I thought you were my trainer!”

“You wanna be a true hero, Herc? Then you're gonna hafta go out there and show me that everything I've taught you so far is gonna pay off.” That was all Phil said before he started walking away.

“But, Phil...,” Herc said in a faint voice.

Phil stopped. With his back still turned, he added, “Oh, and no more trainin' sessions for a while. Wouldn't be fair if I helped you and not him.” He started off again, and then he was gone.

Ven walked up to the disheartened Herc. “Hey, cheer up! So you gotta fight a couple of matches, no big deal.”

Herc raised his head.

“I'm Ventus. Want me to help you train?”

“You'd really do that for me?”

Ven nodded with a grin. When he did so, a little cheer returned to Herc's face. “Thanks, Ventus. I'm Hercules. Herc for short.” Herc extended a hand to Ven.

“Just call me Ven. You're gonna do fine.” Ven did the same and shook hands with Herc.

“Would you mind if we started right now?”

“Of course not!”

The two of them set off together.

A man loitered in the lobby of the Coliseum. With blue hair like crackling flames, a pale face, and black garb, darkness was practically rolling off him.

“Geez Louise, one chump after another. It’s like a who’s who of decathlon disasters around here. All I need is one measly warrior tough enough to give Zeus a jolt of his own medicine!” The man stroked his chin as he muttered, then looked around. “Wait!” he exclaimed softly as he spotted a youth passing by him. “Dark, moody, powerful. Yes! He’s perfect.”

He had sensed a hint of darkness from him. No doubt about it, getting this kid to fight would unleash his black power—and earn the man a new servant.

Filled with glee, he called to the youth—Terra—from behind. “How sad is this?”

“Huh?”

Terra turned around toward the voice. There was no one there—until, without any warning, there was someone standing so close Terra could feel his breath.

“Pains me to see it. All that power going to waste.”

“Who are you?”

“Name’s Hades, Lord of the Dead, god of the Underworld, yadda yadda, how ya doin’? Hey, lemme guess, you’re trying to put the kibosh on the darkness inside you. Am I right? Of course I’m right. Well, anyway, bad idea.”

The appraisal from this guy Hades was like a knife in Terra’s chest. He’d hit the nail on the head. Terra was still hesitant to wield the power of darkness. He was flipping back and forth about either finding some way to coexist with this dark power, or maybe finding some means of using it while keeping the darkness itself suppressed.

“Okay, stay with me here—darkness is inside...everybody. Nothing to be ashamed of. You play nice with it, and darkness will be your best friend. But if you go and get all self-conscious and refuse to face it, the darkness will run over you like a debutante at a toga sale. And then where are you? Nowhere.”

Hades paced in front of Terra as he delivered his monologue, then circled around behind him and slung an arm over his shoulder.

“Now me? I look at you, and I see potential. That’s right, kid. You got the potential to conquer the darkness inside you. And I’ll even give you some pointers. I mean, believe me, if anybody knows conquering, I know conquering.”

“Well, let’s hear it, then. How do I conquer the darkness?” Terra asked.

While he wasn’t wholeheartedly buying what Hades was selling him, Terra was willing to accept it as at least a lead in the right

direction.

“Easy. You sign up for the Games,” Hades answered, then continued. “I know, I know. ‘Please, Lord Hades, the Games?’ But hey, you would be surprised what you can learn in the heat of battle. And don’t worry, I’ll be right there to guide you every step of the way. I’m kinda what you’d call an expert in the art of darkness.”

Hades turned away from Terra with a grin.

“Oh, decide fast. This is a limited-time offer.”

Terra stared at his back, then lowered his gaze to the floor. The power of darkness...Would he truly be able to control it? A self-proclaimed expert in the art of darkness like Hades would definitely know something about the matter. The offer probably came with a catch, but that might just be a risk Terra had to take.

“...What do I need to do to conquer the darkness?”

Terra raised his head and looked at Hades.

Hades’s lips twisted in an unpleasant smirk. “Hold your chariot horses. You would not believe the bureaucracy involved with these things. Name?”

“Terra.”

Hades entered Terra’s name into a form he had pulled out of thin air, as if by magic. “Kinda earthy, but all right. Now...height and weight...What’s this? ‘Favorite god’? Pfft, come on. ‘Hades.’ There, boom. Easy peasy.”

Hades filled out the paper without much help from Terra, then dismissed it by magic and faced the young man again.

“I sense that you’re already starting to get all warm and fuzzy with that darkness inside you. It’s sweet, really. And hey, by the time you win the final match here...you’ll have figured out how to conquer it for good.”

With that, Hades placed a hand on Terra’s shoulder again.

“And don’t worry, anything goes wrong, I’ll make it all go away. Service with a smile.”

“I got it.”

Shrugging off Hades’s arm as he replied, Terra headed into the Coliseum.

The warrior was diligently doing his squats, as he always did. If you wanted to train your legs, there was nothing better.

Will Phil really coach me? I have to win the Games and become a hero—like him. And when I’m like him, I can save the world.

“One hundred!”

Zack’s squats were just getting started.

Herc and Ven faced each other with steely gazes. There was no telling how many times they'd sparred together now. They were covered in dust, up to and including their faces.

This was the training grounds of the Coliseum.

"Ready or not, here I come!" Herc shouted, and the two closed the distance between them. Whereas Herc fought with his bare fists, Ven did battle with his Keyblade. He could tell Herc was getting stronger.

Just then, Ven looked at the shadow of a pillar, sensing someone there. It was Phil.

Was he worried about Herc?

"Don't get distracted!" With a shout, Herc sent Ven flying. It seemed he hadn't noticed Phil.

"Ow..."

"You all right?"

Ven took Herc's hand and stood up.

"I guess the Games are about to start..." Herc said quietly.

"You've gotten a lot tougher, though."

"You think so...?" Herc smiled sheepishly. "Well, I'd better head to the lobby."

"Okay."

As the two of them strolled over, Ven asked something that had been on his mind. "You want to become a true hero, huh?"

"More than anything. See, my father is Zeus, the king of the gods up on Olympus."

"Whoa! Herc, you're a god?"

"No, no, I'm mortal. When I was a baby, somebody stole me from my parents and figured out how to take away my godhood."

"And this true-hero thing?"

"It's the only way I can become a god again," Herc replied, gazing at the trophies decorating the lobby. "If I become a true hero, I can rejoin my father and go back to Olympus."

"Wow...I guess you've really got your work cut out for you!"

Herc turned around with a smile at Ven's encouragement, then asked a question of his own.

"But what about you? How come you're here?"

Ven lowered his eyes. "I'm...I'm just trying to make some friends."

"Well, hey! You've done that already."

"Huh?" Ven looked up questioningly.

Herc walked cheerfully toward him. "C'mon, we're friends, aren't we?"

Friends—yeah, we definitely are.

While the one Ven really wanted to meet was Terra, he had befriended Herc, just as he had Lea. He was glad to make more friends during the search.

“You bet, Herc,” Ven replied with a smile, and just then he saw the soldier-like warrior, Zack, enter the lobby. Phil came in after him.

“All right, you bunch of rookies. It’s time we go over the rules of the Games, so listen up,” Phil said, planting his feet before the three of them. “All the matches are divided into two brackets—one for the East and one for the West. The winners from each bracket go head-to-head in the championship match. Now, I signed you two up for the West ’cause they already got a heavy-hittin’ contender cleanin’ up over there in the East bracket. And if you wanna beat him, you’re gonna hafta hustle in there.”

Herc and Zack nodded.

“Now move those sandals.”

The two of them followed Phil as he entered the Coliseum.

A heavy-hitting contender—Phil’s remarks piqued Ven’s interest. If there was someone like that out there, Ven wanted to meet him. What would he be like?

“Ven! C’mon!”

“Oh. Okay!”

Ven hurried after the others at Herc’s call. He was going to watch the competition from the stands.

Now, let the Games begin.

While Terra dominated the East bracket with win after win, Herc and Zack both steadily climbed up through the West bracket.

Ven ran up to Herc after he won the West bracket semifinals. Phil, who had been observing the whole time from the sidelines, accompanied him.

“Guess we made it.”

“Yeah. And it’s all thanks to you, Ven.”

Phil snorted unhappily. “Good! The other kid’ll be happy to hear that.”

“No! I need you most of all, Phil! How else am I gonna become a hero?”

“Hmph! ’Bout time ya got it!”

Phil crossed his arms with displeasure at the flustered Herc’s excuse and stalked off, passing by Zack as he came in. He had advanced to the finals just before Herc.

“Whoever wins, no hard feelings.” Zack offered his hand for Herc to shake.

“Course not. Holdin’ a grudge wouldn’t be very heroic.” Herc gripped his hand firmly.

“Hey, just making sure. You’re not a hero yet.”

“True.” Herc laughed in response. And with that, the two of them

moved to the center of the Coliseum.

The final match of the West block began.

Herc and Zack leaped into battle with a cry. Just as Herc evaded Zack's blade and threw a punch, Zack also leaped out of harm's way.

"This is really close..." Ven muttered, thinking back on all the repetitious training Terra and Aqua had undergone. They were always neck and neck, too.

"Hey! We got trouble!" Just then, Phil sprinted in with a shout. "There's monsters loose in town, and if they gate-crash the Games, you can forget about the match."

Herc and Zack ceased fighting as Phil explained.

"Real monsters?"

"We have to stop 'em."

They both nodded in agreement, ready to call off the match—until Ven intervened.

"Leave the monsters to me. This match is too important!"

With that, Ven dashed out of the Coliseum, leaving the duo behind.

The two of them seemed about to square off again, but...

"Sorry, I withdraw!" Herc shouted, then ran off after Ven without waiting for a response.

"Huh? So does that mean...I won? Wait, there's no time to worry about that!"

Zack hurried after them, too.

Ven sprinted into town and got into his Keyblade stance before the horde of Unversed.

"You won't get past me!"

He had no experience taking on this many at once, though. There were so many he could hardly see anything else.

It was a bit disheartening. But it was at that moment someone else appeared beside him.

"Herc! What about your match?"

"Forget the match. No way I could let my friend fight alone. 'Cause I'm a hero! I mean, ya know...I'm gonna be one," Herc replied with a smile, then fixed the Unversed with a stern glare. "Come on, let's finish this together!"

The two of them charged in unison.

While the Unversed weren't that formidable individually, there were just too many of them.

"They won't stop coming...!"

"Hey, Ven!"

"Huh? Whoa!"

Herc had suddenly grabbed Ven's leg. "Here we go!"

"Uh, o-okay!"

Whirling Ven around by the leg, the pair turned the momentum into an attack that took out whole swaths of the Unversed.

For the grand finish, Herc hurled Ven at the monsters with a shout. It was enough force for Ven's Keyblade to slice clean through the pack, doing away with the Unversed en masse, all in the span of a second.

"And now the last one!" Ven brought his Keyblade down on the final Unversed as he landed.

"Nice job, Ven!" Herc came running up.

"You really startled me when you grabbed my leg."

"Ha-ha! Sorry 'bout that," Herc said as he awkwardly scratched his head. Still...

"Sorry that I made you lose your match, Herc." Ven hung his head. He wanted to thank him, but this needed to be said first.

"Aw, come on, you don't have to apologize. It was totally my decision." Herc smiled and shook his head.

Just then, a lone Unversed showed up out of nowhere and leaped to the attack.

Having let their guard down, Ven and Herc braced themselves a moment too late.

That was when the other hero—well, future hero—showed up and split the Unversed in two with a single blow.

"What, you didn't save any for me?" Zack said to them with both disappointment and exasperation.

"Hey, you're here?" Herc asked.

"Hey, I've set my sight on being a hero, too. I just don't run as fast, that's all," Zack replied matter-of-factly.

"So you both threw the match? Who won, then?"

"I left first, so it's not me."

"Yeah, but I was only seconds behind you."

"Still."

Ven's question sparked a little argument between the two, until Phil's voice cut them off.

"Hey! I never said I'd coach the winner. All I said was I'd see the match, then decide." Standing before the trio, he continued much like a teacher lecturing his students. "Look, bein' a hero takes more than just muscle. Ya gotta have heart and care about people. And sure, you both get high marks for that. But this time, only one of you cared fast enough—and that makes all the difference."

"Oh man, I was this close!" As the first to infer what Phil meant, Zack sagged in dejection. "Well, that's life."

He was rather quick to bounce back, though.

"I never really introduced myself." Zack took off his helmet and directed a grin toward Herc. "The name's Zack. Congratulations, Herc."

"Thanks, Zack." Herc returned the smile.

"Yeah, well, we'll see if you're still thankin' him when I'm through with ya. You got a long road ahead of ya, champ," Phil reminded Herc.

"Hey—don't count me out. I've still got plenty of big dreams to go with my lousy luck!" Zack declared, then started doing squats on the spot. Herc laughed.

Watching the two of them with a little satisfaction, Ven quietly approached Phil and asked, "Okay, be honest...You weren't really gonna stop training Herc, were you?"

"Of course not. I know that kid's gonna go the distance. But he was stuck in a rut. He just needed a little incentive." Phil's response suggested that he didn't like having to state the obvious, but then he looked at Ven anew. "It's Ventus, right? Well, thanks to you, Herc here has really shaped up. I owe ya."

"Nah, I'm glad. I made a really good friend," Ven replied as he watched Herc and Zack. The two seemed to be enjoying their conversation. The sight reminded him of Terra and Aqua again, just as it had in the middle of their match. He had the feeling they'd be able to laugh together again someday, too.

That was why he had to be on his way.

Ven turned away from Herc and the others and set off.

"You're leaving?" Herc called out to him.

"Yeah. My journey's not over yet," Ven replied as he looked back.

"But you'll visit, right?" Herc sounded a little sad to see him go.

"I'll stop by once you're a true hero," Ven responded with a grin.

"Stop by once me and him are both heroes!" Zack joined them, doing squats all the while.

"Oh, so you mean never come back?"

"Hey, watch it!" Zack barked as he put Ven in a headlock for that little jab. Ven shook him off with a laugh. Herc, Zack, and even Phil all joined in.

"Well, now I really have to go."

"Okay, see ya around."

As soon as Ven was gone, a great cheer roared from the Coliseum.

"Must be the East bracket match," Herc commented.

"Hey, actually, what *are* they gonna do for the final round?" Zack asked.

"Pretty sure you're the winner," Phil said to Zack.

"Really...?" Zack tilted his head, unsure.

"That's how it works," Herc replied, then smiled.

“Ya can’t throw the final match. I got two words for ya: Get out there!” Phil’s words spurred Zack into action.

“Okay, I’ll win this thing! Just you wait!”

He was off like a shot. Herc and Phil shared a smile as they watched him go.

“Okay...this is not what I had in mind. But hey, I can improvise. Time for plan beta...”

Hades paced around the lobby. He hadn’t expected Terra to get so far without turning to the power of darkness. What to do...?

“Pardon me, comin’ through. I’m gonna miss my match.” Zack tried to slip by Hades.

“Hello, plan beta.” Hades called out to him to stop. “Hey, kid!”

“Huh?”

The moment Zack turned around, darkness started creeping in at the edges of his vision until he blacked out entirely. And then...

Terra stood alone in the center of the Coliseum, focusing his mind.

It was time for the East-West bracket final. The last battle.

If he succeeded in conquering the darkness, he wouldn’t need to fear its presence in his heart.

He felt like he was on the verge of finding the key to channeling it—if only he could be victorious here.

A youth wearing a helmet and a longsword on his back, Zack, entered the Coliseum.

“Let’s do this!”

Terra stood ready, and Zack brought his sword into position. However, his movements were fairly sluggish. Was this really the winner of the West bracket?

Zack charged forward with a battle cry. Terra batted aside the reckless attack with his Keyblade. Something felt indescribably off; Zack just wasn’t that strong. Terra closed the gap between them in a breath and jabbed with his Keyblade. Zack slowly collapsed, his helmet tumbling from his head.

The match was over...

Or so everyone thought.

As he made his exit, Terra sensed an eerie presence behind him. When he looked back, he saw the fallen Zack gradually rising to his feet.

“What?!”

He was far more powerful now, suspiciously so, as he attacked. He

charged forward with a roar, and his ferocity was hard to believe.

“Stop it! The match is over!” Terra blocked a heavy blow from Zack’s sword. His strength was nothing like before. What had come over him?

“It’s not...me...”

“What?”

Terra heard him gasp out in a small voice.

“I’m not...doing this...”

He reminded Terra of himself, when he was under Maleficent’s influence.

“Huh? So what do ya think? You like my new super warrior?” Hades abruptly appeared a short distance away. “See, this right here—it’s the power of darkness. Coulda been yours. Still could, if you open up to it.”

“Hades! You were just playing me!” Terra shot back, holding off Zack’s blade for a moment before shoving him away. “The darkness will never have me!”

I won’t let it take me. I can’t, not ever.

“Help me...You’ve gotta...set my heart free...”

Nodding at Zack’s strained plea, Terra rushed straight toward him. He put everything he had into the blow, but Zack stopped it. Terra had driven the boy back a little, but an instant later, Zack’s sword was screaming toward him. Closing the distance as he managed to dodge, Terra blasted off some magic this time. He waited for Zack to stagger, then struck with his Keyblade, but not even that put a stop to Zack’s offensive.

This is the power of darkness...

Terra was reminded once again of how terrible it was. Nevertheless, he would not succumb.

He took a knee for a moment, catching his breath as he awaited Zack’s next move. When Zack sprang into the air and swung his sword down, Terra whacked him in the torso with everything he had. Zack took the full brunt of the blow and went down hard.

That marked the end of the match. A cheer rang out, and confetti filled the air.

“Forget it. It looks like I bet on the wrong dark horse. That kid doesn’t have what it takes to handle darkness,” Hades said disinterestedly, then left at once.

“You gonna make it?”

Terra called out to Zack where he lay on the ground.

“Yeah. I’m finally free. Where is...?”

“He’s gone.”

“Man, how could I let a guy like him control me? I’ll never live it down!” Still prone, Zack slammed his fist into the ground. Terra offered him a hand, which Zack took with a smile and got to his feet. “Thanks, um...”

“Terra.”

“Thanks, Terra. I’m Zack.”

“Hmm, yup—Terra, you’re exactly what I pictured a hero would be. Not the way you look...There’s something else about you.”

But Terra turned away from Zack, apparently not pleased by the praise. “Well, I’m no hero. Trust me.”

“You kidding? Listen to those cheers, man. You don’t get to decide if you’re a hero or not. They do. And they’ve already made up their minds. Whether you like it or not, you’re their hero.” Zack thumped Terra in the shoulder with his fist as he encouraged him. “And mine, too. It’s too bad. I really wanted to fight you fair and square.”

“Maybe someday, Zack.” Terra eventually agreed, and returned Zack’s hit on the shoulder.

“How about another round sometime? The Games are always going on around here.”

“Sure. See ya around.” Terra turned away with a nod.

“Hey, you’re leaving already?”

“My journey’s not over yet.” Still facing away, Terra gave his parting words before walking off.

“Huh. You sound just like the other guy.”

“...Other guy?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Catch ya later, Terra!”

And so Terra put the Coliseum behind him.

Aqua had seen evidence of Terra’s journey in the last world she visited: the homemade Wayfinder that Experiment 626 had treasured. *I hope it means Terra still cherishes Ven and me, too.*

She looked around at several worlds floating in the Lanes Between, but of the ones she could reach, there was only one she hadn’t been to before. Aqua landed on her third world since she’d parted ways with Terra—Olympus Coliseum.

She touched down in a plaza, facing the entrance of a structure that resembled a temple. A golden statue of a warrior stood flanking each side of the entryway.

However, she didn’t get much time for a break before the Unversed appeared, as if they’d been awaiting her arrival.

As Aqua readied her Keyblade, a small man, Phil, stepped between her and the beasts as if to protect her.

“Hiyaah!” With an odd-sounding battle cry, Phil struck a pose and

then looked back at Aqua. "Stand back, sweetcheeks. I'll take care of this."

"Uh..."

Unsure of what else to do, Aqua nodded, and Phil edged toward the Unversed for a moment—then quickly began backpedaling and finally took off running. "Herc," he shouted, "they're all yours!"

At his call, a lone youth, Herc, came rushing up.

The boy didn't really look like he could handle himself. Aqua brought her Keyblade back into position once more and faced the Unversed alongside Herc. His technique suggested he had encountered their like before.

After mopping up the Unversed, with a little assistance from Herc, Aqua dismissed her Keyblade and took a breather.

That was when Phil appeared.

"Oi! Those wackos almost made gyros outta me!"

"Well, maybe if you weren't trying to show off...", Herc remarked with exasperation.

"Who asked you, kid? You'll understand more when you're older," Phil shot back angrily.

"And stronger...Strong enough to be a hero." Herc sighed.

Her interest piqued, Aqua asked him a question. "You think being strong is the same as being a hero?"

"Sure—mostly. Look at how strong Terra is, and he's champion!"

That wasn't a name she expected to hear from Herc.

"So, sugarcakes...You got any plans for later? You know, I've trained a few heroes in my time. Maybe I could recite ya a little epic poetry."

"Do you really know Terra?" Aqua pressed, as if she hadn't heard a word Phil had said.

Deflating a tad, Phil turned away and replied, "Of course I do. He's the local hero everybody's going gaga for—Oh, now I get it. You're one of his fans. Everywhere I go it's Terra-this, Terra-that... More like Terra-bull."

"Oh no, you see, I just want to track him down."

Terra came here...!

"Yeah, tell me about it, sister. You and the rest of Greece! Kid shows up outta nowhere, goes and wins the first Games he ever enters, dazzling the whole town, and then the nudnik up and vanishes!"

"Everybody says Terra's the real thing, a true hero. I can't wait till I'm that tough," Herc added after Phil.

"Pfft, right. He's so tough he turned the last schlemiel who faced him into a raving yahoo."

"Come on, Phil, be nice."

Aqua thought as she listened to them argue. Finally, she

murmured, "So you're telling me he isn't here."

If Terra was already gone, then there wasn't any need for her to dawdle here. She should go check the next world. Aqua turned away from Phil and Herc.

"Whoa, not so fast." Phil called for Aqua to stop, then elaborated. "He may not be here right now, but ya never know. He could always decide he's gonna show up for the Games."

"Yeah...To defend his title."

"And if you enter, there's always a chance you might run into him."

The two continued the conversation, perhaps wanting to keep Aqua there.

"I got an idea. I'll sign you up myself. And if you need a trainer, I'd be more than happy to put you through the ropes."

"But, Phil...I had to practically beg you to agree to train me."

"Shh! Pipe down, kid! You and she ain't got the same attributes, if ya know what I mean."

While the two went back and forth, Aqua considered her options.

Would Terra actually enter the Games? It might be worth taking that chance.

"You know, you're right. Please sign me up for the Games. My name is Aqua. Nice to meet you." Aqua introduced herself to Herc and Phil, then bowed.

"Likewise. Now let's start with a few basics—"

"Thanks, I don't need a trainer." She interrupted Phil with a curt reply. Aqua had no time for training.

"Bah! Women—never changes. So I suppose you still want me to go and get you signed up. Meet me in the vestibule when you're ready."

"Okay. I want to enter right away, so I'll walk over with you."

Aqua and Phil headed off together.

After racking up wins at a furious pace, Aqua returned to the lobby to take a break between matches, then murmured, "All that's left is the final...and still no sign of Terra. The guy I'm supposed to fight is someone named Za—"

She'd meant to direct her comment at Herc and Phil, but she cut herself short when she noticed an unfamiliar boy with black hair was standing before her.

The youth happily struck up a chat. "Aqua, right? Hey, I'm Zack—your opponent in the final. Man, finally! Once I beat you, I get to take on Terra!" the boy calling himself Zack blurted at her, grinning.

"Terra? Why? I don't understand. Are you saying there's another

match after the final?"

"Uh-oh. Guess you didn't get the memo. Oh, Phil! Would you tell her the rules?"

Zack seemed a little stunned. Phil cleared his throat once, then began to fill her in as he paced.

"Fine, here's how it is. The Games are divided into two brackets—you got your East, you got your West. The winners from each bracket face off in the championship match. Now, right now you are competing in the East, and we got no idea about the other side. For all we know, your boy Terra could be cruisin' through over in the West."

"Then I shouldn't be fighting matches here. I should be over there looking for him."

Aqua strode off after she heard Phil's explanation.

"No...you, uh...can't! It's not allowed. Athletes are expressly forbidden from watchin' matches in the other bracket."

His firm tone brought her to a halt, but off to the side, Herc whispered in Zack's ear.

"Did he just make that up?"

"How should I know? He probably just wants to spend more time with that girl."

Phil's voice rose, trying to drown out their exchange. "All right, fine! Look, you gotta just stay and fight this match. The two athletes I entered defaulted before they made it to the top. Give a guy a break. I got a reputation."

Zack and Herc, the two who had forfeited in the last games, shared a glance.

Then Zack added, "Hey, do it for us, too."

"All right, then. I'll finish what I started."

Aqua couldn't refuse such a request. Leaving a battle unfinished wasn't her ideal thing to do, either. Phil smiled.

"You will? Oh, the gods are smiling on me today! I'll be waiting for ya in the vestibule."

"A match between Zack and Aqua? This I can't miss," Herc said excitedly.

"Ix-nay on the atchin'-way. You got trainin' to complete." Phil shut Herc down.

"Oh, that's right...Well, good luck, guys. I'll see you around."

Herc ran off.

Alone together, Zack and Aqua faced each other.

"Aqua, give it your best out there."

"You too."

"I am so fired up!" Zack started doing squats right then and there. It seemed the boy knew Terra. He might be a good source of information.

“Zack, Terra is a friend of mine. How exactly is it that you know him?”

The squats continued as he gave his reply. “He saved my life. During the last Games...this dude named Hades tried to make Terra his pawn of darkness, and he used me to do it. He had some kind of magic or something that made me crazy, gave me weird powers that I turned against Terra.” Zack was getting out of breath, so he left the exercise at that. “But you know what? Terra freed me. And he didn’t need the darkness to do it.”

“I had no idea...”

Zack’s story gave Aqua hope. Observing her mood, Zach flashed her a white-toothed grin. “Well, that’s enough with the drama. I guess I’ll see you in the ring, huh?”

Zack set off at a quick pace toward the Coliseum.

Terra didn’t fall into darkness, even when the trap was sprung.

“Terra...”

Saying his name softly, Aqua gripped the Wayfinder in her pocket. She then made her way to the Coliseum, too.

Zack was already waiting for her in the center of the arena.

“I promised Terra I’d face him. Fair and square.”

Zack drew the sword on his back.

“The friendship between boys...It almost makes me jealous.”

Aqua gave her own response, then brought up her Keyblade.

“Let’s fight!”

Aqua covered the space between them in a flash, launching a strike at Zack. He deftly dodged it with a back-step, then kicked off the wall and retaliated with a downward swing of his sword. Aqua blocked the blow with her Keyblade.

Her next series of attacks, swifter this time, landed. For the time being, he didn’t seem to be much of a threat.

Aqua stepped away briefly, lunged forward across the distance separating them, and then slashed with her Keyblade, all but signaling the fight was over. Zack was knocked back and ended up sprawled out on the ground.

“Ugh, I lost!” Zack cried out in a loud voice, then propelled himself to his feet using his back muscles. He didn’t appear to be injured that badly. “I’ve got a long ways to go if I’m gonna become a hero.” He scratched at his distinctive black hair.

Aqua couldn’t help but smile at him.

However, the congenial mood was dispelled by a man who suddenly appeared in a cloud of smoke. He was clad in black, and his skin had a sickly pallor. The menace around him was unmistakable.

“Really—it’s you? Here I thought I’d drop in to see which muscle-head was up next, and...Holy hydras! It’s just a little girl, a little lassie, a little bluebird.” The man peered into Aqua’s face as he spoke.

“Hades!”

Zack shouted his name.

So this man is named Hades...

“I’m sorry, is that a mosquito? Where did I put that bug spray?” Hades turned around, crossed his arms, and shrugged contemptuously.

“Mosquito?!”

“So you’re Hades. You used Zack and tried to cast Terra into the darkness.” Aqua prepared her Keyblade.

“I take it you’re acquainted with the spineless chickenheart.” Hades leered at Aqua.

“Terra is my friend. And I hear he triumphed over the darkness. He’s not spineless,” she asserted.

“Funny, ya know, ’cause I heard different.” Hades gave a theatrical tilt of his head. “Ya see, it was Chickenheart who asked me for a little, shall we say...instruction on how to use darkness in the first place.”

“Never!”

That couldn’t be true. Terra wouldn’t drift near to the darkness without a push from someone else.

“And he was so close to doing it, too, when the sap went and got cold feet.”

Unable to keep his temper in check anymore, Hades’s blue face turned red—though only for a moment before his complexion returned to normal.

His words put Aqua at ease. Terra’s “cold feet” meant he was keeping his distance from the darkness. Plus, Terra wasn’t the type to scare easily.

He must have had his reasons for falling in with Hades and then rejecting him. He was still free of the darkness.

“Now if that ain’t cowardly, I don’t know what is. But you, my little bluebird...Why not flit over here and demonstrate some real courage for the winning team?”

Hades stepped closer to Aqua with a wide grin.

Her reply was unequivocal. “The darkness doesn’t interest me!”

“Well, that was rude. A ‘No thank you, your godliness’ might’ve sufficed. Fortunately, I still get to—ahem—destroy you. Rules say you face me next. And I have a whole lot of darkness...with your name on it!” Hades bared his black teeth in a smile before disappearing in the same smoke that had announced his arrival.

“Get back here, Hades!” Zack tried to catch him, but Hades was already gone without a trace.

“Man, if only I were up against him,” Zack said with chagrin before he turned back to the Keyblade wielder. “Aqua.” He approached her and grabbed her by the shoulders. “You gotta avenge me and Terra!”

“I will.”

As Aqua nodded resolutely, the interior of the Coliseum grew dim. The clear, blue sky changed to a sinister reddish hue, like something more befitting of the underworld.

“Man, it’s freezing.” Zack shivered and moved himself to the stands.

The air was thick with an uncanny tension. Aqua directed her gaze upward. Something was coming.

That was when she saw translucent hands grip the high wall surrounding the Coliseum from the outside.

Aqua gulped. Beyond the wall, clawing up from below the earth itself, was a gigantic monster made of a frozen mass—the Ice Titan. Hades appeared again before its colossal frame. “I never said one-on-one.”

“No fair, Hades!” Zack yelled as he returned to the battleground from the stands.

Aqua gave a swing of her Keyblade. “I suppose that’s in the rules,” she said.

Aqua had never seen anyone so underhanded; she couldn’t let herself lose to the likes of him.

“Rule Number Two: Combatants may call for backup. Maybe you better call yours, bluebird.”

“He’s already here!” cried Zack, until Aqua barred his way with her Keyblade.

“Don’t, Zack! I can do this on my own!” Leaving no room for argument, Aqua rushed Hades with her Keyblade in hand. But he quickly sprang behind the Ice Titan to escape from harm’s way. Getting rid of the monster first seemed to be the better option.

Fire magic would probably work nicely. Aqua projected flames from her hand, cloaking her Keyblade in a burning aura, and hacked at the Ice Titan’s legs with a series of powerful strikes. Each of its footsteps sent out shock waves, but she jumped over those and brought her Keyblade down on its lowered head.

Going with a flame enchantment was the right choice. The succession of smoldering attacks was dealing massive damage to the titan’s frigid form.

Eventually, one of the many blows decided the battle. The Ice Titan fell still and slowly melted away.

“Aagh!” With a scream, Hades suddenly turned red. Even his blue hair was a burning crimson, all the way to its tips. “I knew that snow

cone wouldn't cut it. I need a real Titan. Stay tuned."

Aqua thought Hades was going to attack—but those were just his parting words. He vanished.

The sky soon shone clear again.

"Stupid Hades...Next time, I'll put him in his place." Zack seemed upset at first, but then he ran up to Aqua and smiled. "Congrats, Aqua!"

"Thanks. But Hades got away."

"I'll get him next time!" Zach cried, but his cheerfulness quickly returned as he peered into Aqua's face. "Oh yeah! You're the champ—we gotta celebrate!"

He fell into thought.

"That won't really be necessary," Aqua replied, but Zack was still mulling something over.

"Hey, how about one date?" Zack said holding up his index finger, as if he had come up with a great idea. For some reason, Aqua's heart jumped.

She'd never been asked on a date before—so she had no idea what to say.

"Oh! You mean—No...I have to leave right away. Besides, I still have so much training to do..."

"Fair enough. And I'm still a work in progress, after all." Zack shrugged it off and smiled again. "Well, how 'bout this—I become a hero, then we go on a date?"

"I...I can't make any promises," Aqua answered desperately, but it appeared he wasn't listening.

"Yes! Great, it's settled. Hero-hood, here I come!"

Spinning away from Aqua, Zack did a single squat and took off.

"Oh...It's over already? And I finished today's training in record time." Herc had arrived, passing Zack on his way out. "Uh, Aqua?" he asked curiously.

Aqua was still spacing out.

"What's wrong? Your face is red."

"Nothing! Nothing. You want to be a hero, too, right? Strength alone won't make you into one." Aqua offered some advice in an attempt to change the subject, but then Herc cut her off.

"I know, I know. Strength alone won't make me a true hero. I'm starting to figure that out. I look at you and Zack, and I can tell there's something more." He told them with conviction. "You've got strength in your heart, too. Never stop trying, and one day you might just become a true hero after all."

The smile Herc gave Aqua in return was well befitting of a hero, bright and inspirational.

Aqua's thoughts turned to Terra, who had driven back darkness,

saved Zack, and become a champion on this world.

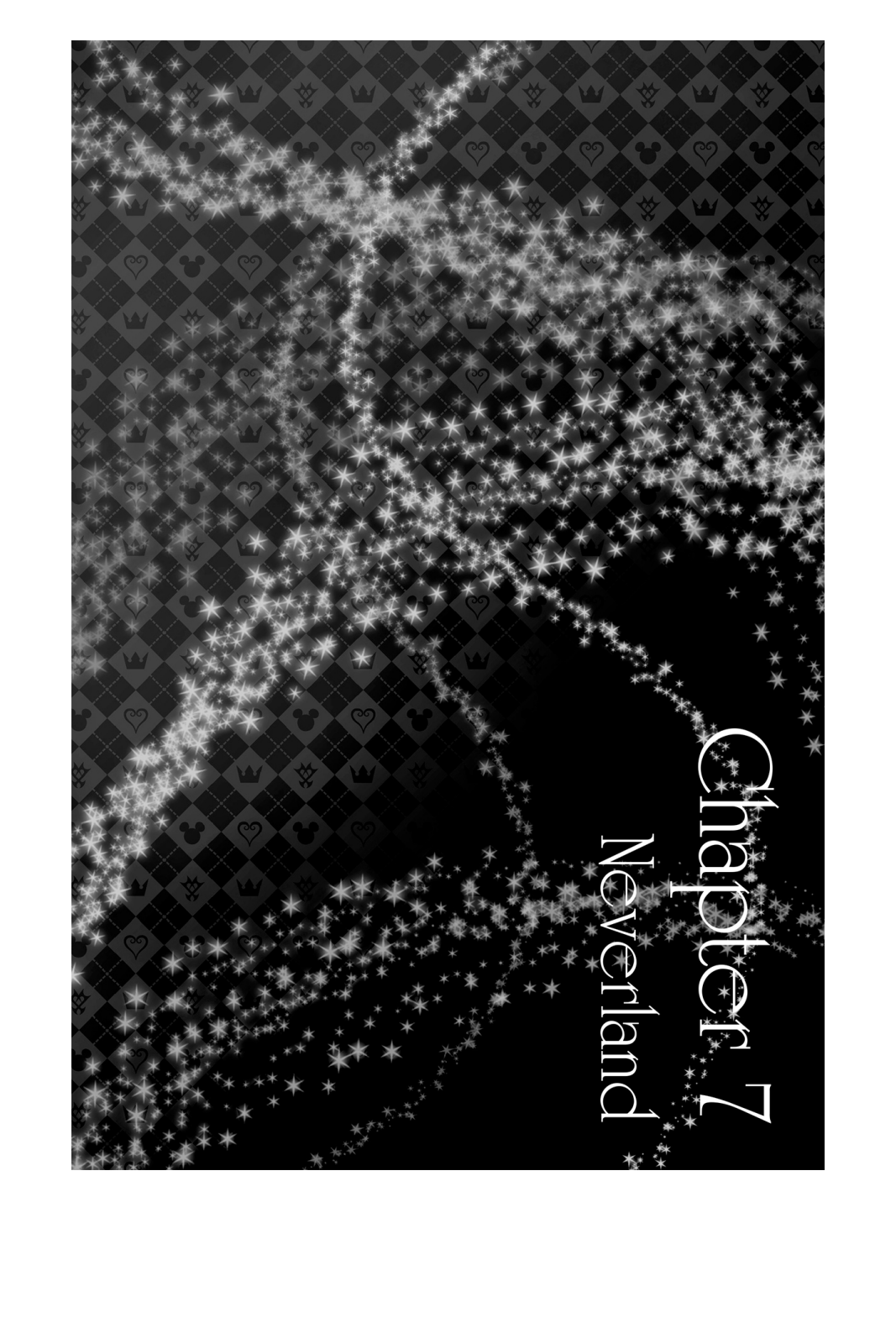
She was positive he would return one day, and by then, he would be strong enough to keep the darkness at bay.

Aqua looked aloft at the sky of Olympus Coliseum. Somewhere out there, her friend was standing up to it even now.

“Well, it’s time.”

“Yeah, hope to see you again.”

Aqua shook hands with Herc, then bid farewell to Olympus Coliseum.



Chapter 7

Neverland

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Neverland

THE NIGHT SKY WAS FILLED TO THE BRIM WITH STARS. Amid the sound of waves, a pirate ship was visible in the distance. A small island sat in the sea—Neverland. The realm of dreams where no one ever had to grow up.

A shooting star slid down through the heavens—except this star zigzagged through the air, flitting this way and that. A fairy glimmering bright as that strange star, Tinker Bell, watched it fall until it finally plunged headlong into parts unknown. Tinker Bell flew off in search of it.

The morning after the star had fallen, a lone figure was looking this way and that in the center of a settlement of tents embroidered with geometric patterns.

I can't find it...!

The owner of a set of big, black ears—Mickey—was just the tiniest bit panicked. While the Star Shard's usual antics bringing him to this world were all fine and dandy, the impact of his fall had flung it off somewhere. He wouldn't be able to get around without it.

Having combed every inch of the area, Mickey at last spotted the Shard behind a tent. He was so absorbed as he ran up to it that he was slow to notice the dark presence nearby.

When he finally sensed the malice behind him and turned around, a deep black hole had already opened.

From it appeared a boy in a mask—Vanitas.

“Move it...”

No sooner had he heard the low voice than Mickey felt a powerful blow.

His vision went dark, and he fell unconscious.

When did he move?!

Meanwhile, Vanitas could not conceal his shock and confusion. His attack had struck home. He'd felt it land. But the moment he did, his target had vanished. Casting a dubious look at the empty ground, Vanitas saw a glowing fragment lying there.

"Hmph..."

The Star Shard skittered quietly when Vanitas kicked it away.

Terra guided his Keyblade glider forward, his sights set on a world he had yet to visit floating a ways off. He had learned many things on the three worlds he had visited after parting ways with Ven and Aqua. He had also been pondering his next move the entire time. Not once had he encountered Vanitas. He couldn't even sense any trace of him.

The world Terra set down upon was full of sharp cliffs offering a commanding view of the beautiful sea below—Neverland.

He could hear water rushing rather loudly in the distance. Most likely a waterfall. As Terra wandered aimlessly toward the noise, he heard the cry of a man up ahead.

He hastened his steps and he found a rather seedy-looking man with a groomed mustache in a red hat and clothing, wielding a pointed rapier. Alongside him was an older man, wearing bifocals and a striped shirt, who seemed to be the first man's underling. They stood at the center of a pack of Unversed.

"What are they, Cap'n Hook?"

Terrified, the old man trembled as he looked imploringly to his companion. So his name was Captain Hook. Come to think of it, the left hand of the man with the rapier had indeed been replaced by a curved hook. Hook and the little man were protecting a large treasure chest.

"Back! You'll not get me treasure!" Hook shouted at them, but the two were no match for what they were up against. Terra jumped in between the Unversed and Hook, shouting, "Leave them to me!"

He readied his Keyblade and laid into the Unversed. Meanwhile, Hook and the old man made a run for it.

Terra felt that these Unversed were not only greater in number, but also more of a threat here than in previous worlds. But as he deftly handled his Keyblade, he realized he had grown during the course of his journey, too. As things stood now, he was still probably okay without drawing on the power of darkness. He remembered Master Xehanort's words. Though Terra wanted to help the one who had seen something in him, he still couldn't get over that mental block.

As Terra caught his breath once the last of the Unversed had fallen, Hook and the old man emerged from their hiding place behind

a tree, grumbling all the while.

"If I'd desired your assistance, I'd have demanded it. We had the situation under control. Isn't that right, Smee?"

"Oh yes, Cap'n. Completely. We woulda cleaved those fiends to the brisket, we would. Why, I'd have given 'em a little of this—and *this*—"

Joining in with Hook's gripes, the elderly fellow called Smee began to act out a fight with exaggerated gestures. From what Terra could see, he wouldn't have fared very well against the Unversed. Hook, too, ignored Smee in favor of starting a conversation with Terra.

"You don't appear to be in league with those knaves, but don't think your efforts mean you'll get a share of me treasure." Hook indicated the large chest.

"I'm not after your precious box, Captain. I'm looking for a person. A boy, wearing a mask. Ring any bells?"

"No, not a one," Hook answered curtly, then turned away.

"Figures."

Vanitas wasn't on this world, either—which likely meant that Terra would need to recheck the worlds he had been to before.

As Terra contemplated his options, Hook addressed Smee, who was still flailing around.

"Smee! Ye blithering barnacle! We're off. We shall leave this place before the light draws 'em back again."

Light?

That word caught Terra's interest.

"Hey, hold on. What did you just say about the light?"

With his back turned, Hook smiled slyly at Terra's question as he realized he could play this to his advantage.

He quickly spun around, sauntered up to Terra, and pointed at the treasure chest again.

"Ah yes, it's heartbreaking, really...This chest, you see, contains light gathered from all around, but that dreadful boy is sure to fly down and seize it."

A boy who could fly? Was that one of Vanitas's abilities? No, he'd never heard anything about that.

This person stealing light did concern him, though. It might be best to meet the boy for himself.

"Hey, why don't I help you keep the light safe? Maybe you can tell me more about this boy who's troubling you. What's his name?" Terra offered.

Hook's face twisted, as if the very idea of uttering the name was detestable as he told him. "Peter Pan."

So it wasn't Vanitas after all. Either way, why was this Peter Pan

searching for light? What was his purpose?

"This chest must be brought to Skull Rock safely. Don't let that Peter Pan anywhere near it!"

"Right. I've got you covered."

Terra nodded at Hook's instructions.

This world's Unversed infestation was unlike anything he'd seen before. Terra did away with the monsters, protecting Smee and Hook while they hauled the chest. They managed to make it through a valley and arrived at an inlet. He could make out a vessel and sails that resembled a pirate ship in the distance. That had to be Hook's ship. Upon reaching the end of the inlet, they found a lagoon with a small boat anchored there.

"This is the spot," Smee told them.

As Terra and Hook boarded the boat, he could see a skull-shaped boulder up ahead. So that had to be Skull Rock.

"Just a bit farther, men," Hook arrogantly proclaimed.

Casting a sidelong glance at him, Terra helped Smee lift the chest out of the boat. They could get into the skull through the mouth.

Smee unsteadily set the chest inside the cave.

"Well done," said Hook while Smee wiped sweat away from his face.

Was this Peter Pan kid even going to show up? Terra carefully scanned the area while Smee and Hook talked off to the side.

"Pardon me, Cap'n, but it's about that shooting star I was mentionin' to ye—"

"Mr. Smee, I ordered ye to drop that. I'll not have ya gushin' on about some shooting star."

"But Cap'n! Most shooting stars twinkle for a bit and then they go out. But this one, it kept on sparklin' and shinin' even after it crashed down. Why, what if it's really a big, enormous, priceless gemstone?"

"Idiot! Why didn't you tell me?" Hook squawked at Smee. Whatever it was seemed to be of the utmost importance to him. It didn't particularly interest Terra, though.

"Ahem...We've a bit of business to attend to and must, I fear, step away. I trust you can see to things till I return..."

"Sure. When Peter Pan gets here, I'll be waiting," Terra assured Hook.

With that, the captain and Smee left the cave.

Hmm—what kind of boy would be after the light?

“Ow...”

After Ven’s Keyblade glider was blasted away during his farewell with Experiment 626 in Deep Space, he’d arrived at an unknown seashore.

Ven came to a halt and gazed at the sea foam between the boulders. It was his first time seeing anything like this.

Wait—have I...?

The smell of the water and the sound of the waves triggered some faint recollection, but Ven couldn’t make heads or tails of it. Here, the weather was fair, and it was comfortably warm.

Maybe I’m just kinda worn out. Ven flopped down on the grass and looked up at the sky.

It was as clear as could be. This world was so pleasant. Breakers crashed in the distance. Lulled by the sunlight and the sound of the surf, Ven’s eyes drifted shut.

A little break wouldn’t hurt.

After hitting it off with Lea in Radiant Garden, Ven had made new friends on each of the next three worlds he visited. Hopefully, he’d be able to keep up the streak.

Far away, he heard the sound of a bell ringing. *What could that be...?*

“Tinker Bell...”

It was someone’s voice.

“Uh...He ain’t movin’...”

Who isn’t moving?

“Let’s try kickin’ him!”

Who’s kicking what now?

When Ven cracked an eye open, something sparkling came into view. The source of the light was a—tiny girl? *A fairy?* As soon as the thought crossed his mind, the girl’s leg flicked up to kick him right on the nose.

“Huh?”

Ven quickly rolled away from the girl, and the momentum of her kick carried her off spinning off through the air.

“Who’re you?” said a boy dressed in a fox costume hovering over him. Ven got to his feet and replied, “Name’s Ventus. But everybody just calls me Ven.”

It took Ven a moment to get his bearings. What he had intended to be a little breather must have turned into a full-on snooze session.

“But where’d ya come from?”

The next question came from a chubby boy in a bear suit.

“Well, you see...”

He wasn’t sure what to say in situations like this. As Ven racked his brain, the fairy girl flew back and yanked on the boy’s fox ears.

“All right, all right, we’re goin’!”

“So long, Ven!”

The fox kid set off with the bear kid in tow.

Ven was curious about their destination. “Hey, where are you guys off to?”

The two stopped and looked back.

“Tink saw a shootin’ star, and we’re gonna go hunt it down!” the bear kid replied.

“A shooting star?”

Whoa, I could hunt down a shooting star like the ones I saw in the Land of Departure! That sounds kinda fun!

“Mind if I come along?”

“Course not. But ya gotta agree to follow us!” the fox boy said cheerily.

“Yeah, it’s, uh...right over...”

As the bear kid spoke, Ven noticed the fairy was flying a little bit higher, until she suddenly took off on her own.

“That-a-way! By the camp!”

“Ready, men? Forward march!”

And with that, the bear and fox kids moved out.

“Kay!”

Ven followed after them. Now that he thought about it, he hadn’t made friends with any boys who were his age or a bit younger. Lea and Herc seemed older, while Huey, Dewey, and Louie seemed more like little kids.

“Hey, what’re your names?” Ven asked as he caught up and positioned himself between the two.

“Names? I’m Cubby,” the bear kid said.

“I’m Slightly,” replied the fox boy.

“And you?” When Ven addressed the fairy girl next, she flew circles in the air in a shower of glittery sparkles.

“She’s Tinker Bell. We all call her Tink,” said Cubby for her. The four strolled along the seaside deep in conversation, until a wicked presence arrived to block their path.

“Unversed!” Ven planted himself in front of the other three to protect them and readied his Keyblade.

“Let’s get outta here!”

“It’s too dangerous!”

“Huh? But I—”

Ven was ready to do battle, but Slightly and Cubby practically dragged him away from the water and into a lush, green jungle. In the center was a big, old tree, gnarled and bare, and a view of a rounded mountain.

At the sound of a rooster’s crow, Ven looked all around, but found

no sign of a bird or anything else. Just then, a youth dressed all in green swooped down from the sky.

“Peter Pan!” Slightly and Cubby cried out in unison.

The boy called Peter Pan gave Ven’s face a careful inspection, scattering a few sparkles just like Tink. “Who do we have here? Never seen you before.”

“I’m Ventus. Call me Ven.”

“Well...if you say so.” Peter Pan gave a brief response, as if he’d lost interest in Ven as soon as he introduced himself, then walked up to Slightly and Cubby—the Lost Boys—and shouted, “Ten-shun!”

Slightly and Cubby stood up straight and saluted at Peter Pan’s signal. Apparently, Peter Pan outranked the other two.

“Now then, men. I don’t suppose you’d wanna capture some real pirate treasure?” Peter Pan asked, standing before the duo.

The boys remained stock-still as they replied.

“Real pirate treasure?!”

“Sure!”

Peter Pan went on. “Well, guess who caught sight of Hook right when he was stashing his treasure? Whaddaya say we sneak in and grab it?”

“Oh boy!”

“Let’s go! Let’s go!”

The two jumped up and down happily. Tink, who had been watching them, gave them each a kick on the cheek, then darted in front of Peter Pan and started flailing in angered protest to tell him something.

“Tinker Bell, what’s gotten into you?” Peter said with concern.

“We were all supposed to go hunt for a shooting star together,” Ven answered in her place.

“Forget that. Pirate treasure is way more fun. Tink, you’re comin’ with us!”

Tink just turned away and flitted off.

“Well, that’s no way to respond to an invitation. C’mon, Ven, you’re a better sport than her, right?”

So Peter said, but Tink had seemed sad to leave, and Ven really was interested in that fallen star.

“I’d love to join you, but first I wanna find the shooting star,” Ven replied to Peter before going after Tink.

Meanwhile, Peter Pan and the Lost Boys struck out for Skull Rock to steal Captain Hook’s treasure.

Slightly and Cubby scoped out the scene from a cliff. An unfamiliar figure was standing in front of Hook’s chest.

“That old codfish...Looks like he’s found himself a new flunky,” Peter Pan whispered. Judging by his looks, he was a pretty tough customer.

“I’ll fly down and distract him. Men, you move in and nab the treasure!”

Slightly and Cubby nodded at Peter’s orders.

He returned the gesture, then nimbly leaped down from their position and swooped lightly over the man.

“Are you Peter Pan?”

“That’s me!” Peter drew a dagger from his waist with a quick glance at Slightly and Cubby.

“The light is not yours to take!” the man called out, and the two clashed blades. Peter’s powers of flight should have given him the advantage. However, the man was casting spells and closing in. Well, Peter couldn’t care less about him, as long as they got the treasure.

When Peter landed on the ground, the man asked him, “What do you want with the light?”

“Light? What light?”

Peter didn’t know what that question was about. He tilted his head questioningly, and at that moment Slightly’s voice echoed through the cavern.

“Look, Pan! We got the chest!”

Slightly and Cubby were carrying the big chest together.

“No, not yet, you blockheads!”

“Hey!”

As Peter’s frustrated shout implied, they were still close enough for the man to catch them. Slightly and Cubby broke into a run as they hauled the box, but ended up taking a spill.

“That hurt!”

“Uh...Sorry.”

From the upended chest spilled a trove of gold coins and gemstones.

“Now, what’s this?”

“Pirate treasure, o’ course. Jewels, doubloons—ya know, the usual stuff,” Peter replied.

The man seemed surprised by the contents of the chest. “I’ve been guarding a pile of loot?” he asked with regret.

Peter answered with just the slightest hint of exasperation. “Sounds like you’ve been tricked.”

“I’ll say. I owe you an apology. I picked a fight over nothing.” He turned to Peter and dipped his head.

“Aw, it was all in good fun. Not every day I get to fight such a good swordsman. Say, what’s your name, anyway?” Peter inquired, crossing his arms.

The man gave his name. "Terra."

"Right then, Terra. Which way did Hook go?"

"They said something about a shooting star..."

Peter Pan's expression changed at Terra's reply. "Shooting star! Tinker Bell must be in danger! Men, guard that treasure with your lives!"

He sprang into the air and soared out of Skull Rock, quick as could be.

"Aye-aye, sir!"

"You go an' get 'em, Pan!"

The Lost Boys—Slightly and Cubby—cheered for Peter as he took off.

"I should be on my way."

Terra walked away after Peter Pan.

Tink led Ven to a cluster of cloth tents woven with geometric patterns. Next to one of them, he spotted something shaped like a blue star.

Hey, that's not Mickey's Star Shard, is it?

Tink flew up to the Star Shard before Ven could reach it, only to find her path barred by an arm.

"A shooting star and a pixie! Must be me birthday."

An uncouth man clad in crimson with a well-groomed mustache, Captain Hook, grabbed Tink in his right hand and scooped up the Star Shard with the hook that took the place of his left. To his rear stood a pirate under his command—Smee.

"Let Tinker Bell go!" Ven rushed toward him, his Keyblade ready.

"Hah! One of Peter Pan's brats. Well, tell that cowardly sparrow, if he wants his precious Tinker Bell back, he'd best meet me at Mermaid Lagoon!"

With that parting shot, Hook and Smee turned on their heels and fled.

"Stop!" Ven hurried after them, only to find a gang of Unversed in his way. "Scram!" he yelled, dispersing the creatures with his Keyblade until a plant-shaped Unversed sent him sprawling. He fought and fought, but they just kept appearing, and they didn't show any sign of letting up soon. What was worse, they were tougher than any Unversed he had faced in the past.

Finally ridding himself of the last of them, Ven sprinted in the direction Hook had fled, but there was no sign of them anywhere.

"I lost them."

He let out a deflated breath. The sun was warm and bright, just as it had been when he first arrived.

The shimmering sunlight brought to mind his conversation with

Terra and Aqua the night before the Mark of Mastery exam. The stars were worlds, and their light came from the hearts in that world—or that's how he remembered it.

What were Terra and Aqua up to now—?

No, this wasn't the time or place. He had to save Tink!

Just as Ven looked up and started forward, Peter Pan swooped down from above.

"Tinker Bell's been pixie-napped!" Ven delivered the bad news.

A grim look appeared on Peter's face, and then he crossed his arms in frustration. "Then I'm too late. Hook's gonna pay for this!"

"He said to meet him at Mermaid Lagoon."

"Gotta be an ambush. Hmph! That old codfish thinks he's clever." Peter Pan started to fly off without a further word.

"Hey, I'm going, too!" Ven felt partly responsible for Tink's abduction.

Peter turned back to Ven in midair. "Well, we have to hurry. Can you keep up?" he challenged.

"You bet!" Ven answered with a grin, then dashed off.

Coming out from Skull Rock, Terra stopped and looked at the sky.

How many times now had he been deceived and used on this trip? His own gullibility was tremendously upsetting. He was furious with himself.

Have I learned anything at all on this journey?

The moment Terra closed his eyes and lowered his head, an ominous rumbling shook the whole island as screams came from inside Skull Rock.

"Ah! Monsters!"

"Somebody help!"

Those were the cries of the Lost Boys. Terra rushed into the cave.

An unbelievable sight awaited him within. No—he had seen this before. It was the same kind of massive Unversed horde he'd encountered in the Lanes Between just before heading to Deep Space.

Hurrying toward the two fleeing boys, Terra placed himself between them and the creatures.

"Stay back!"

Terra swung his Keyblade at the throng of Unversed with all the rage he felt toward himself. While they had numbers on their side, Terra had the advantage of being much stronger than each individual.

What have I been doing all this time? What have I accomplished? What path should I have taken? What should I do now? And what about my dream? Am I still really friends with Ven and Aqua?

Terra lashed out with his Keyblade.

Master Eraqus would never recognize him as a Keyblade Master in this state.

So Terra mused on Master Xehanort's opinion of him.

He'd been overjoyed when Master Xehanort gave him his blessing. It was the whole reason he'd set off on this journey to track down Vanitas for him. It was as Master Xehanort had said: true power was a balance of light and dark.

And yet Terra could do battle just fine without drawing upon the darkness. He'd learned he could win without breaking the rules. He would not lose to the power of darkness. He wanted to help Master Xehanort without giving in.

He also wanted to smile with Ven and Aqua again.

Our dream—it's to become Keyblade Masters together.

That's the one thing that'll never change.

Terra struck down the final Unversed.

"Boy, you sure cut those monsters down to size!"

The Lost Boys came running up to Terra as his shoulders heaved with each breath.

"Shh..." Terra quieted them as he noticed someone coming outside the cave.

"Ahoy! How fare ye, lad?"

"Hook!"

The Lost Boys shared a look when they heard the distant voice.

"Go hide."

The Lost Boys scurried off at Terra's order.

"Fine. All's well," Terra replied to Hook once the boys were completely out of sight. Showing himself at last, Hook approached with what looked like a lantern in his hand.

Trapped inside it was a tiny, shimmering, pixie-like girl.

"What's that?"

"Tinker Bell. One of Peter Pan's dearest friends."

"Can I take a look?"

Hook handed the lantern over at Terra's request, then turned away and grandly proclaimed, "So long as I have his precious pixie, Pan's demise is all but assured."

But before Hook could burst into full-on cackling, a freshly freed Tinker Bell booted him on the nose. Hook backpedaled with a cry, then wheeled furiously on Terra.

"What's the meaning of this?"

"You know, I didn't give it that much thought. Just doing what my heart tells me."

"That's mutiny! And you'll walk the plank for it!"

As Hook shook with rage, Terra summoned his Keyblade.

Just then, however, a sound like the ticking of a clock drew near.

“That sound!”

As Hook turned fearfully toward the noise, a large crocodile appeared in a small inlet a short distance ahead, staring intently at him.

“Wah!”

Hook threw his arms into the air with a shriek and fled blindly from the cave.

“Hooray! We sure showed Hook this time!” Slightly cried, bouncing up and down along with Cubby. Tinker Bell sprinkled a glowing powder on the three of them from above. It lit up the gloom of the cavern like a starry sky.

Tinker Bell flew a happy circuit around Terra, then darted out of the cave.

Terra recalled the stars he and his friends had seen the night before the exam.

Wonder what the other two are up to right about now.

There are so many other worlds beyond our own, worlds we knew nothing about. The light shining down on us comes from the hearts of everyone who lives up there. Maybe Tinker Bell's sparkles are part of that same light, too.

“Aww, so much for the pirate treasure...,” Cubby moaned.

Terra walked up to the Lost Boys and asked, “Did you guys really want the jewels and gold that badly?”

The contents of the treasure chest had been scattered everywhere during the battle with the Unversed, leaving the box empty, and none of the loot was anywhere to be found.

“Nah, we don’t care about that stuff.”

“Uh...but, uh, Pan was countin’ on us.”

Terra knelt down to place himself on eye level with them, then placed a hand on Slightly’s shoulder and said, “I’ll tell ya what—put the stuff that’s really special to you in there. That can be your treasure.”

“Yeah!”

“Real swell idea. Thanks!”

The Lost Boys joyfully expressed their gratitude and walked off toting the empty chest. There was an undeniable spring in their step.

Kinda makes me wonder what I’d put in there.

Alone, Terra gave a look at the dim ceiling of the cavern and Tinker Bell’s light flitting overhead.

Terra bid a solitary farewell to Neverland.

Splitting up with Hook, who had headed to Skull Rock with Tinker Bell, Smee returned to the pirate ship and observed the goings-on at the lagoon through a telescope. With Tinker Bell in their clutches, they should be able to wipe out Pan and his brats in one fell swoop.

Smee spotted Peter Pan and the boy he had seen him with earlier at the lagoon.

“Peter Pan ahoy! Man the Long Tom, and...Fire!”

At Smee’s signal, a cannonball shot out from the pirate vessel and landed right between Peter and Ven at the lagoon.

“Cannon fire? Where’s it coming from?” Ven brought his Keyblade up with a shout as he scanned the area.

“On the water! Over there!” Peter pointed across the sea.

Another cannonball was coming their way from the pirate ship on the water. Like the first, it exploded right between Ven and Peter.

Just then, a small light swooped down. It was Tinker Bell.

“Tink, it’s you! And you’re all right!” Peter Pan exclaimed.

Tinker Bell flew up his face and pantomimed an explanation.

“What? A strange fella with a funny-lookin’ sword has—”

Yet another cannonball interrupted Peter, whizzing past him. His expression grew stern as he said to Ven, “Hold on, I gotta stop that cannon!”

“Okay. I’ll go after Hook!” Ven replied with a nod.

“Right. Tink, if you would.”

At Peter Pan’s word, Tinker Bell fluttered around Ven, sprinkling a glowing powder over him.

“What...?”

“It’s pixie dust. Bet you feel lighter now, don’tcha?” Peter kicked off the ground and floated into the air. “I bet you can fly, too, if you believe.”

With those parting words, Peter soared off toward the pirate ship. Ven was staring at his feet.

I can fly—if I believe?

And that was when he started drifting up, light as a feather.

“Awesome!”

Soaring through the air, he set off for Mermaid Lagoon, where Hook awaited.

Cannon fire thundered in the distance.

At Mermaid Lagoon, Hook listened to the low rumbles as he waited with crossed arms for Peter Pan...whom he secretly hoped would not, in fact, turn up.

If the cannon got him, Pan wouldn’t come here. The end of the cannon fire meant the demise of Peter Pan.

And indeed, the cannon went silent.

Hook let out a massive sigh. "Alas, and so passeth a worthy opponent. To think that his would be such an inglorious end." Hook slumped over in lamentation, until he could no longer contain his mirth. His dejection turned to cackling—and then a shout to the heavens: "At last, that scurvy brat will never trouble me again!"

"I wouldn't be so sure of that, Hook!" Ven came dashing up.

"Swoggle me eyes! No, don't tell me!" Hook hurriedly peered through his telescope at the pirate ship. There, he spied Peter Pan celebrating his victory over a toppled Smee on the deck. "Blast that Peter Pan!"

Hook hurled his telescope to the ground and stamped his foot in anger. He then jumped to a small isle in the lagoon and drew his rapier on Ven.

But yet again, the tick-tock of a clock reached their ears.

"That sound!" Near Hook's feet as he searched around in terror, a crocodile gazed up from the water. "No! Not again! S-stay away from me!"

Hook tried to flee in a panic, but Ven blocked his escape.

"I don't think so!" Ven declared, then lunged at Hook. The contest didn't take long.

Ven swung his Keyblade up from below and caught Hook right on the chin, pushing him backward and into the water. The crocodile made a beeline for Hook where he bobbed on the surface.

"Ah! Leave me alone!" Hook leaped out of the water and practically ran atop the sea as he fled. "Help me, Smee! Smeeeeee!"

The croc gave chase.

As he watched them go, Ven heard Cubby calling from a ways off. "Ahoy! Look what we brought!"

Looking toward the hail, Ven saw Slightly and Cubby approaching in a dinghy, along with Peter Pan flying above them.

"It's a pirate's treasure chest!" Slightly cried. There was indeed a large chest in the boat. When they reached the lagoon, everyone helped unload it.

"Treasure?" Ven asked excitedly, and Peter explained.

"Yup! The same chest I told ya about. We snatched it right from Hook's hiding place." Unable to wait any longer, Peter opened the chest. But..."Huh? How come it's empty?"

Ven peeked into the box from behind Peter Pan, but unfortunately, there wasn't anything inside.

"Uh, sorry, but...we losted all the treasures," Cubby said apologetically.

"Oh well...That's too bad," Ven said with shared disappointment, while Peter Pan stood up with a shrug.

“Aw, who needs it? It was probably just full of dumb old jewels or doubloons or something anyway.”

Slightly suggested, “We could just put what we treasure in there instead—if ya wanna?”

“Yeah, that’s perfect!” Peter Pan readily agreed. “Instead of fillin’ it up with jewels and gold and stuff, we’ll put in what’s truly special to us. The real riches!”

The Lost Boys grinned, then ran off and shortly returned with armloads of toys and other miscellaneous items. Apparently, they kept this stuff hidden most of the time.

“What are you puttin’ in, Ven?” Peter Pan said to him.

“I dunno...” Ven thought for a moment, then pulled out the wooden Keyblade he had received from Terra. “How ’bout this?”

This is my greatest treasure.

“Hm, what is it?”

“It’s just something that one of my best friends gave me.” Ven held the wooden Keyblade aloft as he answered.

“So it’s like a keepsake, huh? You sure you wanna part with somethin’ that special?” Peter Pan said with a touch of concern.

“Yup. I don’t need it if I’ve got Terra and Aqua. Our best memories are still ahead.”

That was why he wanted it kept in the chest. The wooden Keyblade would always remain his treasure, even if he didn’t have it with him all the time, so he wanted to store it alongside the most cherished possessions of Peter Pan and his friends here.

“All right, then. Next time ya visit, we’ll have an even bigger chest waitin’. Enough for all those treasures and lots more,” said Peter.

“Okay. It’s a deal.” Nodding, Ven placed the Keyblade inside the chest. It was then that Tinker Bell carried over the Star Shard to put it in as well.

“Oh, wait, Tink.”

She looked up at Ven as he spoke to her.

“I’m pretty sure that belongs to a friend of mine. Do you think maybe I could hang on to it?”

Tinker Bell shook her head and drew back when Ven extended his hand to her.

“Now, Tink!” Peter Pan raised his voice scoldingly, and with some reluctance, Tinker Bell handed over the Star Shard.

“Thank you.” The moment Ven accepted it with a smile, a powerful light radiated from the Shard, so intense it made everyone cry out.

It swallowed Ven, and he vanished.

“He...he’s gone!” Slightly worriedly looked around where Ven had stood.

“Look! The light!” said Cubby as he gazed at the sky. Just like when that shooting star had fallen, they could see a bright light zipping about every which way as it made its ascent.

Peter Pan spoke quietly as he watched the light. “Don’t worry, men. No matter where that light takes him, Ven’ll always have friends waitin’ to meet him.”

Ven’s companions from Neverland kept their eyes on the glimmering speck as it drew further away until it finally disappeared.

She hadn’t found Terra—or Ven for that matter.

Aqua proceeded along the Lanes Between on her Keyblade glider.

She’d encountered both of them at once in Radiant Garden, and during her visits to the worlds before that she had managed to see them one-on-one. But ever since leaving Radiant Garden, she’d only heard rumors of Terra, not actually met him. Ven she had yet to see or hear much about at all.

Where are they now? What are they doing?

Aqua’s chest was full of emotion as she landed in a new world.

The place was lined with distinctive tents covered in geometric patterns. It would appear she was somewhere on a large island. Looking around, Aqua saw a piece of paper rolled up like a cylinder next to a tent. She absentmindedly reached out to pick it up, when she heard a child’s voice.

“Over there!”

“I’m gonna be the leader!”

Aqua scooped up the paper, ready to hand it over to the owner of the voice, a boy in a fox costume. He was with another boy in a bear outfit.

“Aww!”

The two boys cried out at once.

“We were so close,” the fox boy said with chagrin. Unsure what the fuss was about, Aqua was about to give them the scroll when a youth suddenly swooped down from the sky.

“Too bad, Lost Boys. Tough break.”

“But Peter!”

The kids known as the Lost Boys said the youth’s name. It would appear that this flying boy was called Peter. He continued.

“No buts. You know the rules. The first one to find and claim the treasure map...gets to be the leader. And that’s you,” Peter declared as he stood before Aqua.

“Leader?” Aqua asked back, not grasping the situation.

“Of the expatition!”

“Uh, we’re goin’ on a treasure hunt. And that’s our map you got!”

The boys explained, indicating the paper Aqua held. It was then that a girl like a tiny fairy joined them in a burst of glitter, then flew over to Peter and began to make a fuss.

“Whaddaya mean? I never said girls can’t be part of the gang. C’mon, Tink, the more the merrier!”

A treasure hunt—Aqua wasn’t sure she really had time for that. She needed to find Terra. “I’m sorry, but I have something else I need to take care of. Here, you keep it.”

The pixie girl nodded happily when Aqua offered the map to Peter.

“Too bad...but rules are rules. I guess we’ll just have to call off the treasure hunt,” he stated to the Lost Boys.

“Nooo!”

Watching their exchange, Aqua felt a little sorry for the two dejected boys. With a sigh and a smile, she amended, “All right, you win. I’ll join you for one ‘expatition.’”

“Whoopee!”

The Lost Boys jumped in the air jubilantly. Aqua watched them with a grin. Maybe they were just a bit younger than Ven?

She unfurled the map so they could see it. “As far as I can tell, we’re here. And this mark here is where we’ll find the treasure.”

“Enough pointin’. C’mon, let’s go!” The fox boy tugged Aqua’s sleeve.

“Wait a second. We still don’t even know our leader’s name! I’m Peter Pan. The jealous one over here is Tinker Bell.”

Peter Pan introduced himself and the pixie hovering beside him together.

“I’m Slightly!”

“And I’m Cubby!”

So the boy in the fox suit was Slightly, and the one in the bear suit was Cubby.

“And you are?”

“Aqua.”

Her answer brought a grin to Peter Pan’s face.

“So *you’re* Aqua!”

“Huh?”

How does he know who I am...?

Before she could voice her question, though, Peter soared high up into the sky. “Now, first stop—Mermaid Lagoon!”

“Oh, okay.”

Recovering with a nod, she walked after Peter, prompting the Lost Boys to follow.

They passed through a ravine with a river flowing through it, traversed the jungle, and came upon a small lagoon. They could hear

shouts from the other side.

"I have you now, Peter Pan! Today's the day I shall be rid of you forever!"

A lone mustachioed man dressed in red clothing and pirate hat with a big feather stood upon a small island in the middle of the lagoon. To Aqua, he seemed disreputable, even creepy.

"I'm busy right now, Hook. We're on an expedition. Can't I show you up some other day?" Peter Pan started forward again as if he couldn't be bothered.

"You'll show me up now! Give back me treasure!" The man called Captain Hook stamped his foot on the ground angrily.

"Who's that?"

"Aw, that's just Captain Hook. He's a two-bit pirate codfish." Peter answered Aqua's question wearily.

"I'll cleave *you* into two bits, boy! Smee!"

Calling to what was presumably one of his henchmen, Hook brought down the artificial left hand for which he was named and then hustled off. Once he did, a cannonball shot from the ship anchored offshore and made landfall right by Aqua and the others.

"Whoa!"

"We're sitting ducks out here. Run!" Aqua urged the Lost Boys to hurry, only to discover Unversed in their path. "Leave them to me," she said.

Peter Pan nodded to Aqua and flew ahead leading the Lost Boys.

"Got it. Okay, men, this way!"

The Lost Boys followed.

Once she made sure that they were out of sight, Aqua cast magic at the Unversed. Cannon fire rained down around them.

She had been to several worlds now, but it felt like the Unversed here were the strongest yet. But they were still no match for her after her travels. Avoiding shots from the cannon, she took down wave after wave.

Once she finished them, she went after Peter Pan and the others.

Her pursuit led her to the base of a steep ascent called Rainbow Falls, where water spilled down from a height so great she couldn't even see the top from down here.

The Lost Boys were also looking up at the waterfall, only with some unease.

"What is it?"

"The mark on the map points all the way up there," Cubby said dejectedly. Climbing this precipice would be quite a challenge. But then Peter Pan said, "Aww, relax. A little pixie dust and we'll be there

in a jiffy.”

“But...we’ve never had to flied that high before!” Cubby lowered his gaze, perhaps frightened.

“What if we fall?” Slightly didn’t appear so confident, either.

Aqua wasn’t sure what “pixie dust” was, but getting to the top would have been a monumental task for those two.

“Hey, when did you two turn into cowards?”

As Peter Pan reprimanded the Lost Boys, Aqua couldn’t stop herself from appealing on their behalf.

“Don’t you think you’re asking a bit much of them?”

“This is between me and them, Aqua,” stated Peter curtly, crossing his arms before the Lost Boys. “Men, only the bravest of the brave can claim that treasure.”

“Yeah, we know...” Cubby had no choice but to fall in line at Peter’s firm tone.

“Tink, if you would.”

Despite Peter Pan’s request, Tinker Bell looked away hesitantly.

“We haven’t got all day.”

When Peter prompted her again, this time a bit more strictly, she slowly floated into the sky along the waterfall and created a locus of light.

Is that light the pixie dust?

“Follow Tink!”

Peter would not take no for an answer, so the Lost Boys hopped into the air at his command. When they did, the two of them floated and began paddling upward, like they were swimming through the air. Peter Pan flew after them and called to Aqua.

“C’mon, you too, Aqua!”

Following Peter’s lead, she pushed off the ground and drifted upward.

It was an extraordinary feeling. Even the once-nervous Lost Boys seemed to be having fun.

After Aqua and the others climbed the light to the top of the waterfall, the sights that greeted them very much resembled their starting point.

“Hey, aren’t we back where we started?” Aqua murmured softly.

Slightly spoke with disappointment. “Ya mean we went all the way around Neverland for nothin’?”

“Well, ya conquered all sorts of obstacles to get here. And to me, that’s certainly not nothin’,” Peter Pan advised the Lost Boys. He seemed like an older brother looking out for his younger siblings, in a way that reminded Aqua of Terra and Ven.

“You know, I had you all wrong. You were just looking out for

them back there. Being a good leader.” Aqua apologized for her misunderstanding.

“Yeah, of course I was.” Peter replied bashfully, turning away.

The moment didn’t last long, though—a voice rang out from nearby.

“You’re too late, Peter Pan! I’ll be taking what’s mine now.”

“It’s Hook!”

Hook and an older pirate who looked like his minion stood flanking the treasure chest a short distance away.

“Smee, secure me treasure.”

“Aye-aye, Cap’n!”

The old man, Smee, opened the chest. “C-Cap’n, it’s the treasure. It’s b-been...” Upon opening the box, Smee struggled to explain.

“Spit it out, you idiot!” Hook yelled as he peered inside the chest. When he did, he saw that what he had expected—the gold doubloons and jewels—were nowhere to be found. Instead it was full of toys and other knickknacks.

“Odd’s fish! It’s all junk!”

“Whaddaya mean, junk? Those are our treasures, Hook!” Peter retorted as the pirate wailed.

“But what did you do with *my* treasure?” Hook flailed his arms about like a child, yelling even louder.

“Oh, we losted it all,” Cubby casually answered to Hook’s desperate plea.

“You what?! You scurvy brats have crossed me for the last time!”

Hook quivered with rage, but...

Just then the ticking of a clock arrived.

“That sound...”

Hook trembled and, as if on cue, a crocodile popped its head out of the river running into the waterfall.

“Not you again! No, get away from me!”

Though he was waving about a left hand that could have served as a weapon, Hook was unable to overcome his terror and blindly fled with a scream.

“Wait, Cap’n!”

Smee followed his lead. The escape was so amusing that Peter and the others burst out in laughter, and even Aqua couldn’t help but giggle.

All that remained was the treasure chest. The whole group gazed at it in a circle.

“Is this...?” Aqua spotted Ven’s practice blade amid the random assortment and picked it up.

“Oh, Ventus left that here,” said Peter Pan, looking at Aqua. “I guess it’s a special keepsake or somethin’. But don’t worry about him.

He said he would be all right without it. And then he promised to visit us again with even better treasures—maybe enough to fill a hundred treasure chests.”

Aqua gazed at Terra’s name carved into the wooden sword.

“Ven...He was here...,” Aqua murmured softly, and the moment she did, an intensely dark presence seized her attention. “And someone else.”

It was coming from somewhere not so far away.

“What’s the matter?” Cubby inclined his head worriedly.

“It’s nothing. Best that you stay here.”

Not wanting to worry them, Aqua swallowed off and took off toward the source of the darkness—the village.

It’s that masked boy...!

“So, have a good time hanging out with the kiddies?”

When she reached her destination, she was greeted by a voice dripping with sarcasm.

There he stood. In his hand was Ven’s wooden Keyblade.

“How’d you get that?”

She’d just put it back in the treasure chest a moment ago...

“I think that kid’s outgrown such a childish toy, if you ask my opinion.”

The masked boy, Vanitas, snapped the wooden sword and discarded it on the ground. He then summoned his own Keyblade to his hand and held it in a fighting stance before Aqua. She glared at him, but her breath caught in her throat.

“Just like I’ve outgrown my need for you,” he said.

Gritting her teeth at his insufferable attitude, she shouted, “You freak!” and took her Keyblade firmly in hand.

This was her second time facing the boy. The dark miasma around him was far more intense than before. Just as she had grown stronger during her travels, so had he.

The two of them gauged the space between them, sharing a hostile glare all the while.

Vanitas was the first to move. Closing the distance in a flash, he sent out an inky blackness from his Keyblade. Aqua blocked it, built up momentum, and then launched her own offensive. Vanitas took a step back to dodge, but then his Keyblade was ramming into her chest.

“Ungh!”

An instant later, she slammed her own Keyblade into his neck. Vanitas tumbled back, only to right himself swiftly and come at her anew.

They both exchanged strike after strike, and it seemed like their

duel would never reach a conclusion.

After one particularly fierce clash of their weapons, Aqua and Vanitas stepped away from each other. They were both panting heavily. Sweat beaded on their foreheads the moment they stopped moving. Neither one could take much more.

Aqua managed to catch her breath and brought her Keyblade back into position. Though she couldn't see the boy's face behind his mask, he was surely as exhausted as she was.

She turned her Keyblade on Vanitas, then sprang into the air and brought it down on his shoulder. His Keyblade drove into her abdomen, but Aqua bore the pain for a moment so she could get in an uppercut with her weapon on Vanitas's chin.

His body sailed through the air, then slammed to the ground all sprawled out.

His Keyblade had been knocked from his hand, and a moment later, it hit the earth beside him.

Aqua, too, sank to the ground on her knees.

"I've done it...He's...finally...finished."

Ven's broken practice sword lay in Aqua's field of vision. Wanting to pick it up, she tried to stand—only to slump to the ground once more. A smile filled her face.

"Ven, Terra...You can rest easy."

Aqua's consciousness grew faint, and the last thing she saw was the blue sea.

As if he'd been waiting for Aqua's eyes to close, Vanitas practically sprang to his feet.

"...Man, that...actually hurt...," he muttered, rubbing his abdomen. He snickered.

His wounds weren't serious, and the pain was what made him stronger, after all.

Countless little aches harangued Vanitas's body.

Guess that means more little pieces of me are gone.

Wonder who it was? Terra? Ventus?

A Dark Corridor opened before the cackling boy.

Let's get ready for the grand finale, shall we? I bet Master Xehanort is gearing up right about now, too. Vanitas practically buzzed in anticipation of what was to come.

And then—he vanished, melting into the darkness.

Somebody was calling her name through the blackness.

“Aqua! Aqua! Aqua!”

“Mm...”

She could see Peter Pan’s worried face. There were the Lost Boys, too. And lastly Tinker Bell.

“Are you all right? What happened?”

“I’m fine,” she said to the concerned Peter, then slowly got to her feet. She couldn’t sense the masked boy’s presence any longer.

“Oh no! Look at Ven’s treasure!” Peter Pan exclaimed as his gaze landed on the broken wooden sword.

“It’s okay, Peter. Whatever it is that binds us together isn’t going to break so easily...and that’s our real treasure. I think Ventus knew that. That’s why he left this behind,” said Aqua as she picked up the broken sword.

“You must really be close. And that’s somethin’ pretty special. You and Ventus...and Terra, was it? One day you should all come back!”

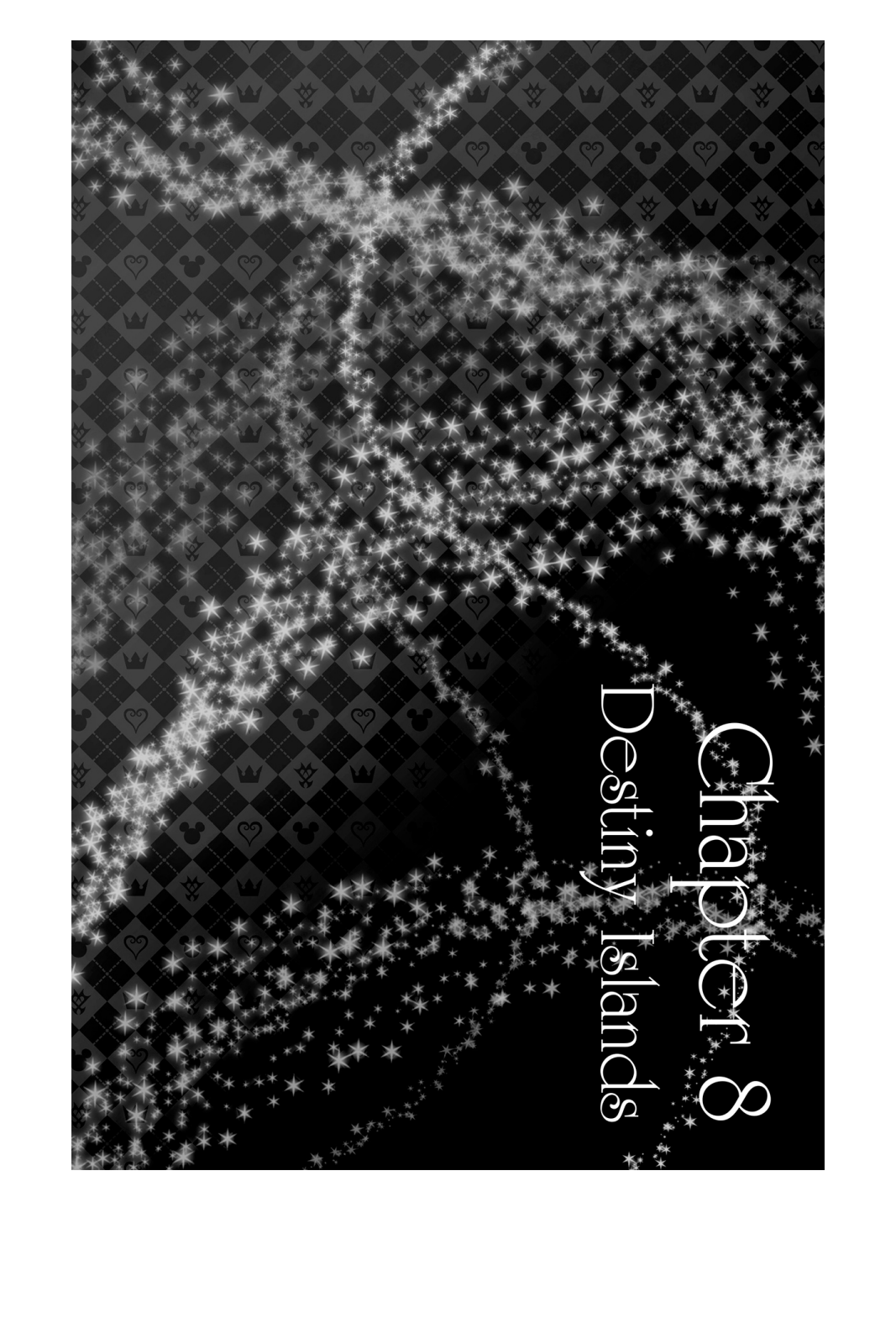
“I’d like that.” Aqua replied to Peter with a smile, then looked at the sky.

Still—where did that masked boy go...?



To the Future

To the Future



Chapter 8

Destiny Islands

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Destiny Islands

MYRIAD STARS GLITTERED IN THE HEAVENS ABOVE A SMALL AND VERY SPECIAL WORLD—or perhaps it would be better to call it a fragment of one, directly connected to the Ocean Between. A tall, solitary spire rose from this island floating in space.

“Gawrsh, the king must be pretty far away now...”

“Wak...”

Donald and Goofy sat at the bottom of the steps leading to the tower, where they gazed at the sky. The two of them had arrived here just a short time ago.

They had come to ask Yen Sid, master of the tower and teacher to King Mickey, for information on their liege’s whereabouts. However, it turned out that not even the great sorcerer Yen Sid was privy to this knowledge.

Each and every one of the stars hanging in the sky was a world, and the king was supposedly out there on one of them.

But they couldn’t find him. The two of them sighed, slumping with dejection, when a great light flashed down from the sky.

“King Mickey?!” cried Donald immediately, but the one who emerged from the fading brilliance was a young boy.

“Nope, doesn’t look like him,” Goofy replied with disappointment—until he spotted the glowing starlike object in the boy’s hand. “Look! That feller’s got the Star Shard the king borrowed!”

Donald leaped up with a cry.

“King?” The boy, Ventus, inclined his head in confusion as he waited for the pain of his rough landing to pass.

Who’s this king? If he had the Star Shard—then maybe they mean Mickey?

Ventus got to his feet, ready to tell them about Mickey, when Donald grabbed him and Goofy started shoving him forward.

“Huh? Hey, take it easy!”

“Hurry up!” Donald exclaimed, hurrying Ven along into the tower. Their faces were grave as they led him up the stairs.

“Okay, but Mickey is my friend, and—”

"He is?" Donald stopped and peered up at Ven.

"Yeah. We fought together. But then we got separated and—"

Ven's expression grew somber. Donald and Goofy shared a glance.

"If yer a friend of the king's, then there's nothin' to worry about. I'm his royal knight, Goofy."

"Wak! And I'm Donald, the court magician!"

"I'm Ventus—just call me Ven." Ven smiled after he introduced himself. He had the feeling he would get along just fine with these two.

"Where could the king have gone off to...?" Goofy looked down sadly.

"Maybe we can find out with the Star Shard."

"You mean this?" Ven handed it over to Donald.

"Quack..." Donald carefully inspected the darkened Star Shard.

"We should go see Master Yen Sid," Goofy suggested, and the name rang a bell.

Yeah...I've definitely heard that name before. But where? "Who's Master Yen Sid?"

"The king's teacher," Goofy replied. If he was the king's teacher, then they probably had the same relationship as Ven and Master Eraqus. But why did the name sound so familiar?

"Anyway, let's get going!" Donald urged impatiently.

"Okay," Ven replied, and he climbed the staircase alongside the duo.

They opened a compact wooden door and entered the room beyond to find a wizened old man with a very long beard sitting within. He was draped in a robe and wearing a very wizardly pointed hat patterned with moons and stars, and he regarded them with large, commanding eyes.

Donald and Goofy stood at attention on either side of Ven.

"Yen Sid, sir! We just got a clue as to where the king might be," stated Goofy, his posture straight as an arrow.

"Ah, Ventus."

The first thing out of Yen Sid's mouth was Ven's name. Though a bit surprised that he knew it, Ven had heard Yen Sid's name before, too. Maybe they had some connection.

The sorcerer continued when he saw Ven's confusion.

"Eraqus has told me much about you. If I am not mistaken, you were ordered to return home."

"Well, sir, I..."

That came out of nowhere. Ven looked around fretfully; at this rate he might get hauled straight back to the Master. But then Yen Sid said, "No matter."

"Huh?"

“Mickey has difficulty following directions, too,” continued the sorcerer.

Ven was so relieved, he couldn’t resist a smile.

“Where is this clue to Mickey’s whereabouts?”

“I have it here.” The ever-respectful Donald set the Star Shard he had received from Ven moments ago upon the table.

“This feller Venquist...er, Ventilate...Veggie—”

“Just call him Ven!” shouted an irritated Donald as Goofy racked his brains trying to remember the name.

“Sure. That’s what I usually go by,” Ven replied with a grin.

Donald smiled at last, too, and made his report to Yen Sid. “Ven had it when he got here.”

“Please, explain,” the sorcerer asked Ven.

“I ran into Mickey. But we got sent flying into the light—I don’t know where he went. He wasn’t in the same world as the one where I found that.”

“As I thought...Mickey has been hurling himself from one world to the next. That explains why I could not discern his location.” Yen Sid received Ven’s explanation with a nod.

“You can now, can’t you?” Donald asked, full of concern.

“Yes. I can.”

He began to move his hands about. As he did, a white mist like smoke or a cloud arose, revealing an image of Mickey collapsed in a wasteland.

“Mickey!”

“The king!”

Ven, Donald, and Goofy all leaped forward at once with a shout. But then the image vanished, and the mist dispersed.

“What happened?” Donald asked frantically. “Where’d he go? Is he okay?”

“There is a dark and powerful force that is interfering with my magic,” Yen Sid replied with a small shake of his head.

“Just tell us where the king is, Mr. Yen Sid, sir, and me and Donald will go right there and save him!” Goofy declared as he stood upright in a knightly manner.

“You two? That may not be adequate.”

The pair shared a look.

Then Goofy took his shield in hand, and Donald took up his staff.

“But I’m the captain of the king’s royal knights!” Goofy declared.

“And I’m his magician!” Donald added.

Yen Sid’s mouth remained closed in a tight line, however. Ven finally broke through the tension.

“I’ll find him. I recognize the place we saw.”

“If you go, we’ll go with you!” Donald offered.

Ven gave a slight shake of his head. “No, I owe him. Mickey saved me once, and I want to return the favor.”

“Aw...” Donald let out a disappointed sigh.

“But,” Ven replied with a smile, fixing each of them with a warm look, “don’t worry. I swear I’ll bring him back safe.”

Ven looked at Yen Sid.

The corners of the sorcerer’s frown lifted upward in a smile, and he nodded. “Very well, Ventus. We will leave it to you.”

Ven dipped his head, then turned back to Donald and Goofy.

“Ven!”

“The king is in your hands!”

Donald and then Goofy both entrusted the king to him.

“You can count on me!” Ven replied confidently to the two of them, then turned away from Yen Sid and bounded off. He had to get to Mickey as quickly as possible.

Ven put on his armor as he dashed down the steps of the tower, not wanting to waste another moment.

Hold on, Mickey.

Terra made his way along the Lanes Between after he left Neverland. He didn’t have a destination—he just had to keep moving forward, to track down Vanitas—to prove Master Xehanort was right about him. He knew all this, and yet he still had questions about so many things.

His own darkness. Hope. Wishes. The treasures he held dear. Aqua. Ven. Becoming a Keyblade Master.

As all sorts of things raced through his mind, a beam of light swept over Terra.

Raising his head, he found that a swirling luminescence was coming together right in the direction he was headed.

It was so incredibly warm, swelling and swelling until eventually it swallowed Terra.

He had felt this warmth somewhere before.

The light guided him to his next destination—a beach.

He was on a small island, where the sun was on the verge of sinking into the sea. He could hear the rush of the surf. No one seemed to be around.

The waves lapped up on the white sands, only to retreat. Terra closed his eyes and let the tide fill his ears, basking in the pleasant warmth spreading across his heart not unlike that light from before. The waves washed across his feet, and when he looked down, he spied a fruit shaped like a star. Terra picked it up.

“Somewhere out there, there’s this tree with star-shaped fruit...”

Recalling what Aqua had once said, Terra removed the Wayfinder charm from his pocket.

This island must be home to that tree she mentioned.

When he scanned the seashore, Terra’s gaze landed on the source of the fruit, growing on a tiny islet connected by a long, narrow bridge. It looked like he could reach it from over by the small hut at the edge of the sand. Terra returned the fruit to the sea and, still clutching his Wayfinder, walked down the beach.

The sand was a pristine white. Each step crunched underfoot and left footprints that disappeared just as quickly as they came. The only other noise came from the waves.

The shack was dim inside when he opened the door, and the gloom became almost uncanny when he closed it behind him. Terra relied on what little light remained as he climbed the stairs in the rear of the shack.

A sudden thought took him by surprise, and he came to a stop and stared at the Wayfinder. The weak evening sun streaked down onto it through a crack in the dilapidated roof.

Motes of dust in the air danced in the little ray of light. Terra clutched the Wayfinder tightly. Anxiety gripped his chest like a vise.

Do I still have a connection with Aqua and Ven?

He was worried his bond with them might have been broken.

I wonder if we’ll ever be a team again.

Terra gazed up at the light streaming through the gap in the roof.

But the light has led me here. What am I supposed to do?

Tucking the Wayfinder back in his pocket, Terra started forward once more. He opened the door of the shack and walked outside under the crimson evening sun. He closed his eyes against the glare for a moment, but the setting sun still shone on him, casting a bright-red over his shut eyelids.

When Terra opened his eyes and resumed his progress, he heard two sets of footsteps behind him, jumping down from the hut and dashing right past him.

It was a pair of young boys, one with chestnut-colored hair, the other with silver.

“Hey, slow down! Would you just wait for me?”

“Giving up already? Come on, Sora.”

“That’s enough! I can’t run anymore!”

The two boys jumped onto the tree with the star-shaped fruit and sat down to watch the sunset. They were laughing as they talked about something, but Terra wasn’t sure what.

He stopped and observed them from behind.

Terra had no intention of interrupting, but when he was about to walk away, he sensed something special about the boy with the silver hair.

It was light—a kind of dull luster that was still weak, but special. Perhaps that luminescence he'd felt had guided him here so that he would meet this boy.

The light wants me to do something. Maybe something only I can do...?

Terra began to stride away, then leaped down from the walkway onto the sand.

“Oh! Ahoy! We're over here!” Just then, the brown-haired boy called Sora stood and waved at a small boat out on the water. “Riku, race ya. First one to the boat gets to be captain! C'mon!”

Sora dashed off before the silver-haired boy he'd called Riku could respond.

So Riku's his name...

“You call that running?” Sora came sprinting by Terra.

Riku resignedly got to his feet and began trudging after him, but he came to a halt near Terra.

Their gazes met.

“Hey. Did you come from the outside world?”

“Huh? Why would you say that?” Terra was slightly caught off guard by the unexpected question. Not many knew about the existence of other worlds. How had Riku found out?

“Because nobody lives out here, and I know you're not from the main island.”

“Smart kid.”

He accepted the answer, but it didn't explain how the boy was aware of other worlds. The normal assumption would be that Terra came from elsewhere on this one.

So he decided to ask a question of his own. “How about you? What are you doing here?”

“Oh, my friend's dad took us out on the boat,” he replied. Shooting a glance at Sora a short distance away on the jetty, he continued, “This is where we like to play, but they won't let us row out here by ourselves. Not till we get older.”

Riku sounded miffed as he kicked at the sand.

“Must be hard, huh, stuck in one place.”

Riku approached the water's edge and stared out at the crimson horizon. “I heard once there was a kid who left for good,” he said, and as he did, Terra saw someone else standing there for a moment, almost superimposed over the boy.

Terra didn't recognize him—but the young man looked familiar. It was the one who had ventured beyond the borders of this world, in

his youth.

And when Riku turned back to face him—he became a young man, too. *Why am I seeing this other person, and Riku all grown up? Is the light telling me the future? Destiny? If so, then why?*

“So how did you get here, anyway?” the boy asked, bringing Terra back to the present.

Riku was back to normal as a boy, not the other man or the teenaged Riku.

Terra couldn’t quite conceal his bewilderment, but he asked, “Is there some reason you’re interested in the outside world?”

Riku turned away from him to the horizon once again. “Yeah,” he said. “I wanna be strong one day. Like that kid who left. He went to the outside world. I bet he’s really strong now.”

What was the “kid who left” up to now? Terra wondered.

“I know it’s out there somewhere. The strength that I need,” he said determinedly.

Strength.

It was the same desire Terra had embraced for so long. He wanted to be strong, and he’d believed it would make everything work out. However...

“Strength for what?”

What created that desire in me?

When Terra asked, Riku turned and smiled. “To protect the things that matter. You know, like my friends.”

Terra nodded deeply.

Yeah. The reason I wanted to be strong was to protect what matters to me. To keep Aqua, Ven, and the worlds safe.

“Outside this tiny world is a much bigger one,” Terra explained, and Riku stepped closer.

Terra summoned his Keyblade to his hand. Riku stared at him and his Keyblade quietly as the young man knelt down on the sand and held the weapon out to Riku.

“In your hand, take this key. So long as you have the makings, then through this simple act of taking, its wielder you shall one day be. And you will find me, friend—no ocean will contain you then. No more borders around, or below, or above, so long as you champion the ones you love.”

Riku gripped Terra’s Keyblade in his small hand.

And with that, the ceremony reached its silent conclusion.

“Rikuuu!” Sora called from a ways off.

Riku let go of the Keyblade and waved at his friend.

“C’mon, hurry it up!” Sora cried, bouncing up and down. Terra dismissed his Keyblade and whispered into Riku’s ear.

“You’ve got to keep this a secret, okay? Otherwise all the magic

will wear off.”

“Okay.” Terra patted Riku on the head when the boy nodded.

Impatient, Sora came dashing toward Riku, and the boy ran to meet his friend in the middle of the beach.

“Hey, what was that all about?” Sora’s curiosity was insatiable.

“Aww, you know.” Riku looked away.

“Know what? Why won’t you tell me? Who was that guy? Somebody you know?”

Sora fired off questions in rapid succession, but Riku just began walking away. “Maybe.”

“Aww, there you go again. Just tell me!” Sora hustled after him.

“I really can’t. I’ve gotta keep it a secret.”

“Not with me you don’t! I’m, like, the best secret-keeper in the world!”

“Nice try.”

“Aww, Riku!”

Terra slowly stood upright as he watched the two of them leave.

Protecting the things that mattered—like his friends. He still had something he could protect.

Even the power of darkness could be used for good, to help others.

Terra went on his way.

Ven touched down on that mysterious land where he once fought that masked boy. He was sure this was the world where Mickey lay fallen. A strong, chill wind blew against Ven, carrying clouds of dust.

“Mickey!”

Ven spotted him a short distance away and rushed up to him. Try as he might to help Mickey up, the king was out cold.

What should he do? Should he take Mickey back to Yen Sid? What was the best course of action?

“We meet again, boy.”

At that moment, he heard a voice. He was sure no one had been there before; Ven got to his feet and turned toward the man.

“Master?”

The one who stood before him was Master Xehanort. Just as Ven realized that he hadn’t seen him since Terra and Aqua’s Mark of Mastery exam, a dull pain pierced his temples.

He had been to these wastelands with Master Xehanort before. And he was almost hurled into the ocean once, before eventually being placed in the care of Master Eraqus. The memories were finally coming back.

Ven dropped to his knees.

The ache spread. *I’m gonna throw up. I don’t understand. It hurts so*

much. Whose memories are these? They're mine. This is everything I forgot.

“Ah yes, so you are starting to realize what you lost—oh, but not for good. You had to lose in order to find. Now it can all be yours again, if you only reach out and take it.”

Master Xehanort sounded so far away. Ven didn't understand. The wind was loud over his voice. The ache in his head intensified.

“Reclaim the part that left you. Clash with him! Pure light against pure darkness, to forge the ultimate key. The all-powerful χ -Blade!”

The pain stabbed deeper, and Ven collapsed to the ground.

“Key...blade?”

His body was without strength. All he could do was gasp out that word. He had no idea what was happening. He didn't know what Master Xehanort was talking about, either.

All that stuck in his head was that one word.

“Not the Keyblades you and I carry. χ ...A most ancient letter. Some say ‘kye,’ but the meaning is the same. Death...A letter that spells endings.”

When Master Xehanort raised his hands toward the heavens—a black vortex spread among the clouds and began to draw everything into the air. It was possible that within the vortex was its own sort of Ocean Between.

“And I have the power to make it?”

Ven couldn't fathom what Master Xehanort was saying. The black swirl grew with small crackles of dark lightning.

“Correct. Eraqus knows it, too. He knows exactly what you are.”

“The Master?” Ven whispered questioningly from the ground.

“Haven't you ever wondered why he never granted you permission to leave his side, to grow stronger? Eraqus was frightened of you. If you were to learn the truth, realize what you are...He never trusted you. Why else would he keep you within his sight at all times?”

A dark bolt struck right by Ven's face, bringing him back to his senses. The word χ -Blade rose up in his hazy mind, along with his training with Master Eraqus.

“Yeah, he never let me see other worlds, no matter how much I asked.”

He slowly climbed to his feet. He remembered now. Whenever Terra and Aqua went somewhere, he'd always been left behind to hold down the fort. He'd always believed it was because he was still too young. Had he been wrong?

“Go.” Master Xehanort stretched out his hand toward Ven with a gust of wind behind it. “You can ask the man yourself. Learn the truth, and remember you have a greater purpose!”

The stormy gale lifted Ven and blew him up and up, until he was

sucked into the inky darkness above.

Still unconscious, Mickey was also pulled into the blackness, where he vanished along with Ven's screams.

Ven came to in the Lanes Between. His armor had been activated somehow. He couldn't see Mickey anywhere. Ven clutched his head as another dull pain overtook him.

The sudden rush of memories hadn't felt real. *Were those mine? And what's the χ-Blade? What am I?*

What does Master Eraqus know about me that I don't?

The Land of Departure floated in the distance.

Ven summoned his Keyblade and hurled it into space. It transformed into his glider and drifted back toward him.

He spurred his Keyblade along toward his destination.

A light shot by Terra as he raced along atop his Keyblade. It was moving incredibly fast, but he could tell it was Ven. Where was he headed? That didn't matter; Ven was traveling much too quickly. All was not well with his friend.

Terra hurriedly made to chase him, only to hear a voice in his head.

"Master Terra. Find me. We must speak at once."

"Master Xehanort!"

He called the voice's owner by name. Terra cast a worried look toward Ven's light, then steered his Keyblade toward the summons.

It was coming from the badlands he had visited once before.

Still aboard his Keyblade, Terra drew up before Master Xehanort atop a boulder on the edge of a cliff.

"Master Xehanort, you wished to see me?"

"There is no time to lose! I've terrible news. Ventus has stumbled upon the secrets of his origins."

"Ven?!" Terra's breath caught in his throat at the news. "I just saw him. He passed right in front of me. What happened?"

"Ventus is on his way home. If you could have seen the fury in his eyes...! I'm certain he's capable of anything. I fear the boy may attempt to force the truth out of Eraqus. Master Terra, you must hurry back and see to your friend's safety."

"Of course," Terra replied. After a small bow, he urged his Keyblade onward. He was going to Master Eraqus. He was going home.

Aqua soared the Lanes Between after leaving Neverland. She hadn't sensed Terra or Ven there, but she had encountered the boy in the mask again...

Where had he gone off to?

Either way—she was still in pain. That boy had been no joke during their battle in Neverland.

Who is he? What does he want?

He had been on a whole other level compared to their run-in at Radiant Garden. Her ability to go toe-to-toe with him at all meant that Aqua's skills had improved, too, during her travels, but she was still uneasy.

With these thoughts in her heart, Aqua raced along on her Keyblade until a sudden warmth caused her to look up.

"I sense light..."

Before her was a radiant tide.

Aqua plunged forward, practically drawn into it.

She landed upon a small island warmed by the evening sun.

"This is..."

Aqua crossed over a small, narrow bridge. All she could hear was the sound of waves. As she walked toward the crimson sky and sea, she smiled as she spotted a tree bearing star-shaped fruit on the islet ahead.

"So this is where they grow."

Aqua removed her Wayfinder from her pocket and held it firmly, staring at it.

"Somewhere out there, there's this tree with star-shaped fruit, and the fruit represents an unbreakable connection."

"Terra...Ven...I hope we're ready for the storm that's coming," she murmured anxiously.

Her battle with Vanitas had created a sense of foreboding in her heart. Aqua wasn't sure she could take him if they clashed again. But she had to, for Ven's and Terra's sakes.

"Hey, wait up!"

"Too late, Sora. See ya at the finish line!"

Aqua turned around as she heard children's voices. Two boys, one with chestnut hair and the other with silver, were racing each other. The brown-haired boy was falling behind.

Apparently the finish line was below the walkway where she was. The chestnut-haired boy panted heavily with his hands on his knees.

"One more time! You just got lucky," he pleaded. His chances of winning didn't seem great, though. Giggling at the two boys, she walked along the planks and hopped down in front of them. They

looked up at her quizzically.

“Whoa!”

The kid with brown hair yelped with surprise when she landed right before him. He scratched his head bashfully. The silver-haired boy beside him had simply been staring at her, and he gave Aqua another look.

He almost burned with sincerity, just like Terra. There was an air about the grinning boy with chestnut hair that reminded her of Ven—actually, he was the spitting image. She chuckled despite herself, and the two boys shared a look.

“One of you might be special enough.”

The words left Aqua’s mouth before she even realized. She felt a special light from these two.

“Hey, you two mind telling me your names?” she asked, kneeling down before them.

“I’m Sora!” answered the brown-haired boy cheerfully, raising a hand.

“And you?”

“Riku,” the boy with silver hair replied quietly. What Aqua had felt from this boy was the presence of a Keyblade. Someone had already passed this boy the power—maybe Terra? If so, there didn’t need to be two chosen wielders so near to each other.

She wouldn’t set these two on the same course as her and her friends. If their paths diverged, the way hers and Terra’s had, they would only suffer.

Aqua turned back toward Sora and asked him a question.

“Sora, do you like Riku?”

“Of course I like him. He’s my best friend!”

“Good.” *Just like something Ven would say.* It made her happy. “So then if something happens, and Riku is about to get lost—or say, he starts wandering down a dark path alone—you make sure to stay with him and keep him safe. That’s your job, Sora, and I’m counting on you to do it, okay?”

Sora and Riku looked at each other uncertainly. Aqua put a hand on each of their heads. She was certain fate had something special in store for the two of them. Maybe their destiny had already begun.

“Let’s go, Sora.”

“Okay.”

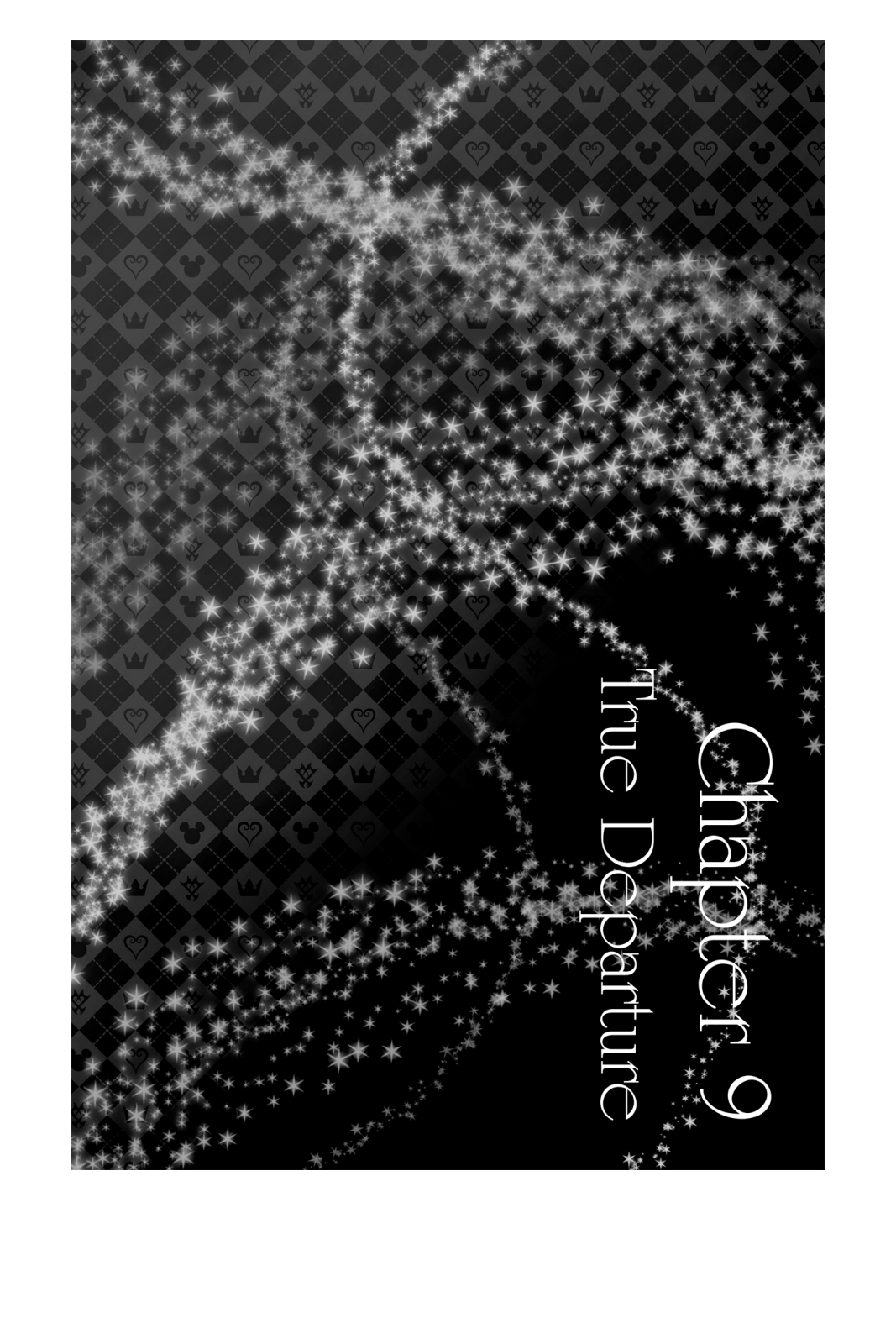
The pair walked off, and Aqua stood up slowly as she watched them go.

Terra—what’s to become of us? I have no choice but to go.

She had faith that, while they may have gone their separate ways, someday they would find themselves together, working toward the same purpose. Just like she had found herself here with Riku and

Sora.

And with that, Aqua strode off.



Chapter 9

True Departure

Chapter 9

True Departure

AS XEHANORT STRODE QUICKLY THROUGH THE GREAT HALL, Eraqus called toward his back.

“Wait, Xehanort.”

He’d wondered if Xehanort would stop, but it appeared that he still considered Eraqus enough of a friend to do so. But he would never turn to face him.

So Eraqus addressed his protests to his back. “There is a reason the precepts bar us from such knowledge. Why do you seek the χ -Blade? Would you blanket all the worlds in darkness, reduce them to nothing?!” The warning rose to a shout, and Xehanort slowly looked back at him.

He spoke like a sage delivering a prophecy. “But darkness *did* cover the world once, in legend. We know so little about the Keyblade War—only that it was just the beginning. Amidst that crisis, a precious light was found.”

That was part of the hidden lore of the worlds, the beliefs passed down as fairy tale. Eraqus was well aware that Xehanort had been fascinated by the story for quite some time. They’d even discussed it between themselves.

That wasn’t to say Eraqus didn’t possess any interest in the χ -Blade himself.

However...

“It is a curious tale—and one worth exploring,” Xehanort continued. “They say ruin brings about creation. So what, then, would another Keyblade War bring? When the darkness falls, will we be found worthy of the precious light the legend speaks of? I must have these answers. The χ -Blade needs to be forged, and with it the door to the Keyblade War unlocked!”

“Fool! You would risk an apocalypse out of sheer curiosity? I will never allow it, Xehanort. Not while I live!” Eraqus’s voice grew harsh as he approached Xehanort.

Yes, it was a forbidden art. The χ -Blade, unique among Keyblades, was the key to the very secrets of the world, and Xehanort’s desire to

know all of this was born of selfishness and nothing more.

Clouding the worlds with darkness and suffering for the sake of personal greed and curiosity was far from what was required of a Keyblade Master. Yes, seeking the truth of the world was part of a Master's duties, but what Xehanort was saying just seemed wrong.

Despite this, Xehanort carried on. "But once again you have it wrong, Eraqus. Darkness is a beginning, you see, not an end. At birth, every one of us emerges from darkness, do we not?"

Xehanort had always contemplated the light and the dark. They had studied it together, and occasionally touched upon the questions Xehanort entertained.

Why was light held to be good, and darkness wicked?

Why had the world divided—no, disunited—from chaos into those two forces?

In Eraqus's view, light was the home of the future. If darkness was what had given birth to light, then its shadows belonged in the past.

"Poetic excuses!" he shouted.

However, Xehanort turned away and began to pace, rejecting his dissent and Eraqus himself.

Perhaps there is no stopping you any longer, Xehanort, he thought. "If words won't dissuade you, only one thing will." Eraqus called forth his Keyblade.

For the sake of the world, he would strike down his friend.

As a surge of power rose in Eraqus's body, Xehanort spun back and fired two black masses from the Keyblade in his hand.

The masses became blades that ricocheted off Eraqus's right brow and left cheek, leaving wounds. A pitch-black miasma veiled Xehanort's frame as he slowly drew nearer to Eraqus.

"That power..." Black smoke rose from the cut on Eraqus's cheek when he rubbed it. "Has the darkness taken you, Xehanort?"

When had he acquired its power? When had he sold his soul?

Though they were supposedly comrades, though they should have been on the same side, Eraqus had failed to notice any of it.

When? How? Why?

Were the secrets of the world—the Keyblade War and what lay beyond it—so alluring? Was the darkness beyond the light, the darkness within the light, so much harder to resist than the calling of protecting the worlds as the owner of a Keyblade?

"Not your concern."

With those parting words, Xehanort strode away. Eraqus slammed a fist into the floor as he watched him go.

Why did I fail to stop him?

Is it my fault?

Where did I go wrong?

*Is the darkness itself what beguiled him so?
Must this plague steal my dear friend from me?*

Eraqus then gradually opened his eyes. Before him stood his pupil Ventus, who had returned. The student who had been entrusted to him by Xehanort.

Ventus stood in the vestibule with his gaze lowered.

“Ventus, you’re alone? I thought Aqua would...” Eraqus went to greet him with a smile.

He had made a heartfelt decision to take in the boy when Xehanort had visited this land—had returned after he and Eraqus had parted ways—with Ventus in tow. Eraqus would under no circumstances turn him away.

He had believed the wrongs of the past, the old grudges, had become bygones as they reached their elder years, and the time had come when they had hope of rekindling their friendship, when they could perhaps speak together as fellow teachers with apprentices.

And Xehanort had told him:

“This boy is my sin. That is why I wish to leave him in the care of your light. I fear the darkness will take hold of me once more in my quest to glean the truth of the χ-Blade. I beg you, Eraqus, heed the request of an old man. This is my amends to you, to the world, and to this child. I shall live out the remainder of my days in some remote corner of the world.”

The boy’s heart—Ventus’s heart—was an empty husk. While Eraqus hadn’t known whether he would be able to restore his heart, he had sworn that he would do everything in his power to try. Eraqus had also been pleased by Xehanort’s apparent trust in him, allowing him to take charge of a boy bearing some connection to the χ-Blade itself.

It was for these very reasons he had taken such care in Ventus’s upbringing. His heart had seemed to return, and he had Terra and Aqua to thank for at least some of that. Still, the fact that Ventus had become whole again also meant his sense of self had flourished. It was only logical that Ventus had wanted to leave this place in pursuit of Terra.

Eraqus’s inability to prevent it was his own fault.

He knelt down before Ventus and took his shoulders in both hands. He then peered into the boy’s face.

“Well, what matters is that you’re home. You don’t belong outside this world yet. You need to stay here, where you can learn—”

“In your prison?” Ventus muttered.

“What?” he responded reflexively in a low voice. That was

something Eraqus had never expected to hear.

“That’s your excuse...for keeping me imprisoned here, isn’t it?” he spat, raising his head. His face was hard and full of enmity.

Eraqus stood and asked, “What did you hear?”

“That I’m supposed to be some weapon...Some kind of χ-Blade!”

He hadn’t heard the loathsome word since that day—when Ventus had come to this world.

Who could Ventus have learned it from? No, Eraqus had a good idea of the culprit. Very few knew of the χ-Blade’s existence. So, the one who most likely enlightened the boy was...

“I knew it. Xehanort—he could never let it go,” Eraqus uttered as he rubbed the scar on his cheek.

All of it was part of his plan.

But—it couldn’t be. No, there was yet time to stop him.

Putting Ventus out of reach would mean Xehanort could take this no further. He must not be allowed to repeat his mistakes. “I failed. I had the chance to stop him, and I couldn’t do it. But I will not fail again.”

Eraqus summoned his Keyblade to his hand. Ventus recoiled in fear.

“Master! What are you...?”

Eraqus brought his Keyblade to bear on Ventus, then declared, “The χ-Blade has no place in this or any world. Xehanort has made his purpose clear...and I am left with no choice. Forgive me...but you must exist no more.”

Xehanort had tried to create something that must not be. If Eraqus righted this wrong by his own hand, his own mistake in dealing with Xehanort would be expunged.

Eraqus swung down his Keyblade, and countless chains shot forth from it, identical to the chains around the Land of Departure.

They were the ones that bound this world. Only the Keyblade Master who guarded this land could wield them, and they would bind Ventus to seal him away. And thus the world would be safe.

Just as the chains were about to reach Ventus, frozen in apparent fear, Eraqus closed his eyes.

Even if it was only for a moment, he didn’t want to see the fallen form of his pupil. But—

“Ven!”

If his return had been a heartbeat later, Terra wouldn’t have been able to save Ven.

Still in his armor, Terra placed himself before Ven to shield him and knocked away Master Eraqus’s attack.

“Master, have you gone mad?”

He couldn’t believe it—Master Xehanort was right!

“Terra! I command you—step aside!” Eraqus ordered.

Terra removed his armor. “No!” He could sense Ven behind him.

It’s okay. I’ll protect you.

“You will not heed your Master?”

“I won’t!” Terra cried out, his Keyblade still at the ready.

He didn’t know if Ven had tried to do anything to Master Eraqus, but if the Master had turned his blade on Ven, Terra would keep his friend safe.

“Why do all my attempts to reach you fail? If you don’t have it in your heart to obey...then you will have to share Ventus’s fate.”

A tear traced down Master Eraqus’s cheek.

“Master...!”

In a flash, Master Eraqus charged toward him. Terra took the brunt of his downward strike, but held firm. It was all he could do to keep the constant blows that followed at bay.

Sparks danced before his eyes.

—If he were driven any farther back, Ven would get hurt.

Terra tried to hold his ground, but was getting pushed back bit by bit. There had to be an opening—how could he beat Master Eraqus?

“Enough, Terra! He’s right...!” Ven cried out from behind him.

“Quiet!”

What Ven was trying to tell Terra was most likely the secret concealed within himself. That didn’t matter, though. *I don’t care what you are, Ven; I just want you safe.*

“Terra...,” Ven said softly, and that moment, both boys were sent flying by an attack from the Master.

When Terra looked up, cradling his unconscious friend, Master Eraqus held his Keyblade aloft. An intense, radiant force was coming from his form.

If he didn’t do something now, he was a goner. Their Master would snuff out both of their lives. He had no choice but to call on all his strength. To set free all the hatred and thirst for power within him.

That it was Master Eraqus he faced was of no importance. Anyone who would harm Ven was his enemy.

Hate your Master.

An aura of tremendous darkness arose from Terra’s body. Flush with power, Terra stared at his hand gripping his Keyblade.

“I will not...let you hurt my friend!” he shouted.

Master Eraqus’s eyebrows shot up. “Has the darkness taken you, Terra?”

As his Master shouted in reproof, Terra pointed his Keyblade behind him, and an inky black hole leading to the Lanes Between

opened.

Terra threw Ven inside. He couldn't afford to look back after him.

"Wait, Terra!"

Terra heard a call from Ven—maybe the impact had awakened him—but soon he could no longer sense the Lanes Between or his friend.

All that remained were the two of them.

The air was thick with tension; a single misstep would prove fatal.

All the same, there was no way Terra could lose now.

Not now that he had the power of darkness.

Terra lunged toward Master Eraqus head-on.

"Ngh!"

Master Eraqus blocked the attack. His face was close to Terra's, twisted with pain.

"Terra, why—?"

He didn't answer, but instead kicked Master Eraqus in the stomach and used the newly created distance between them to immediately fire off some magic.

Master Eraqus dodged the spell with a leap backward, and as he landed in a crouch, Terra charged at him again.

However, the upswing of Master Eraqus's Keyblade caught him straight on the chin and sent him flying back. Terra slammed to the ground and scrambled desperately to his feet, then glared at his teacher, who had turned his Keyblade on him.

"Master..."

Terra wiped his lips. A metallic taste filled his mouth.

Why? Why did you try to harm Ven?

But if he asked the question, Terra felt it would leave him weaker. And the pain was amplifying his hatred.

Plus, Master Eraqus seemed to be having misgivings.

If he were, that would give Terra an opening. Even with the power of darkness, he would never be able to beat the Master without some sort of weakness to exploit.

Terra stood up and brought his Keyblade into position. This next attack would be his last. He wouldn't be able to handle any more.

Terra took a deep breath. Then, he quietly let his anger grow—and his hatred. He called upon all his power.

"Yaaaaaah!" With a roar, Terra poured that power into his Keyblade and fired off an attack.

"What?!"

The amassed force took the form of a black torrent that hit Master Eraqus in the chest.

"Agh!"

The Master staggered.

At that moment, Terra felt a chill across his entire body, as if he had just woken from a nightmare.

What...did I do? Why is Master Eraqus on the ground?

Terra dismissed his Keyblade and reached toward the Master, shaking his head.

“What have I done...? Master...I just...wanted to keep Ven safe,” he implored.

Master Eraqus took a couple of weak, shaking steps, his hand pressed to his chest, and said, “No, you were right. I failed you, Terra.” He continued, his gaze directed downward. “Perhaps I’ve no one to blame but myself for the darkness inside you. And now, I’ve done worse...raised my Keyblade against you and Ventus.”

Terra extended his hand as if to place it over Master Eraqus’s.

“My own heart is darkness!”

Just then, something black struck Master Eraqus’s back. His eyes flew open as he let out a cry, his Keyblade tumbled from his hand, and he collapsed to his knees. Terra approached and tried to catch his Master, but Eraqus’s body turned to light that slipped through his arms—and he was gone.

“Master Eraqus!” Slumped over on the ground, Terra called his teacher’s name and wept.

How? Why did it come to this?

As Terra screamed over and over in his mind, a figure approached.

“What a sight. Why do you trouble yourself with remorse, Master Terra? The man was bent on doing harm to your friend, his own pupil!”

Terra lifted his head to see Master Xehanort.

“Master Xehanort! Why?”

Xehanort turned away from Terra and began to walk. “You know, at times I find your progress quite striking. But you still fall short. Let all that anger out, my boy. Give your heart over to darkness!”

“What do you mean?”

Terra stood and readied his Keyblade, and Master Xehanort unhurriedly turned back to face him.

“Still so blind...Then I will make you see. Come to the place where all Keyblade wielders leave their mark on fate—the Keyblade Graveyard!” Xehanort called forth a Keyblade shrouded in darkness and raised it upward. “There you will watch your dear Ventus and Aqua meet their ends, and the last light within you will die!”

A stygian beam lanced skyward from that Keyblade into the heavens. A giant black orb of darkness hovered overhead and began to swallow up everything in the vicinity.

In an instant, the blue sky disappeared behind a storm of grim

clouds.

“You won’t need a home anymore where you’re going!”

“What?!”

Master Xehanort turned away with a chuckle, and when Terra made to go after him, the Master disappeared into a corridor of darkness that opened up ahead.

The gusting wind intensified, and the buildings linked by chains lifted upward, unable to resist the force swallowing up the world. Lightning streaked through the heavens as the Land of Departure was destroyed.

The only structures that survived, if only barely, were those with chains attached.

Terra removed the Wayfinder from his pocket and held it tight.

“Ven, Aqua...I won’t let him hurt you.”

Terra then donned his armor just he had when he first left this once-beautiful land and put his ruined home behind him.

He would use this power for the sake of his friends.

His destination was the Keyblade Graveyard—where the fate of all Keyblade wielders had been etched.

After she left the Destiny Islands, Aqua raced along on her Keyblade glider.

There, she had been able to share a brief respite with those two sweet little boys. She’d even felt Terra when she was near the one called Riku.

As Aqua scanned what lay before her to find the next world she would visit, she spied something floating up ahead. No, it was someone—with big, black ears...

“Is that...Mickey?”

Aqua accelerated toward Mickey as he drifted in space, then drew him to her. He was unconscious, and apparently injured.

“How’d this happen?” she whispered.

Mickey stirred in Aqua’s arms. “Master Yen...Sid...,” he muttered fitfully.

She had heard the name from Master Eraqus before setting out on her journey.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take you back to him.”

Still cradling Mickey, Aqua raced off on her Keyblade to find Yen Sid.

She arrived at a strange place where a small tower stood.

Aqua opened the door with Mickey still in her arms, then climbed the stairs. She passed by several rooms before she knocked at the chamber she assumed was at the top.

“Master Yen Sid, it’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Aqua. May I enter?”

“You may,” came the low rumble.

Aqua opened the door tentatively. On the other side of a large desk sat an imposing, white-bearded man of some years.

“Ah, Mickey,” Yen Sid remarked as soon as she entered.

“So you do know each other. My teacher, Master Eraqus, has mentioned you before.”

It seemed bringing Mickey here was the correct choice.

“He is my apprentice, though I had lost track of him after he left so suddenly...”

“King Mickey!”

“King Mickey!”

Two others, Donald and Goofy, came rushing noisily up, all but drowning Yen Sid out. The duo apparently knew Mickey.

Aqua gently handed Mickey over to them, and they carried him over to one side of the chamber and laid him down gently.

“It’s okay. I don’t think he’s hurt,” she assured them.

Donald and Goofy shared a look, then peered at Mickey’s sleeping face and called out to him again.

“King Mickey!”

“King Mickey!”

A bit of the tension left her mouth in relief.

“Aqua,” said Yen Sid, “the stars bring me grave news.”

She gulped as Yen Sid continued.

“Master Eraqus’s star has blinked out. I am afraid that means he has been struck down.”

She couldn’t believe him—or didn’t want to. A web of emotions spidered across her chest all at once. As formidable as the Master was, felling him couldn’t have been an easy task. *Why? What happened? And—*

“Who is responsible?”

Yen Sid averted his gaze from Aqua and her rising questions and looked beyond the window. Three stars twinkled in the sky.

“Master Xehanort...and Terra.”

“No!” She approached Yen Sid and slammed her hands on his desk.

Donald and Goofy started in surprise at the loud noise, then glanced at each other.

“That’s absurd! Terra would never do that!”

That’s not possible. He couldn’t possibly do that. There’s no way...It’s

not true, right? Terra?

"I hope with all my heart that you are right about your friend." Yen Sid lowered his large eyes for a moment, then continued in a soft voice, "There are some things even the stars cannot tell me."

"Where is he? Where can I find Terra?" Aqua pressed him further.

"Terra's heart is leading him to the ancient Keyblade Graveyard, where wielders of those weapons once waged war."

The Keyblade Graveyard—Aqua had heard tales of such a place.

"All right. I have to go after him...and see if it's true." Aqua gave a bow and turned away from Yen Sid, not wanting to waste even a second.

"Be on your guard."

Aqua looked back slightly, then directed her gaze forward again with a nod.

It couldn't be true.

But if it somehow was, there had to be a reason, extraordinary though it may be.

And—if someone had plotted to bring this about, Aqua would keep Terra and Ven safe from them.

We have an unbreakable connection.

Aqua closed her hand on the Wayfinder in her pocket, then left Yen Sid's chambers.

Ven landed on white sands.

He sat up, obviously panicked, on the pristine beach of a small island. Without even taking in his surroundings, he ran up to the portal as it closed.

"Wait, Terra!"

But it vanished right before his eyes.

This is all wrong. It's not right that Terra fought the Master. It's because of me. This only happened because I listened to Xehanort and ran off to see the Master. It's my fault. It's because I'm...part of the χ-Blade.

He had to go to Terra.

Ven looked at the palm of his hand, then lifted his arm to put his armor on.

"Going somewhere?"

However, a voice stopped him. Ven spun around to see Vanitas atop the narrow wooden walkway connecting the island with a smaller one.

"I'm through with you!" Ven said vehemently, then turned and began walking away. He didn't have time to deal with the likes of him here.

"Well, I'm just getting started with you." Vanitas summoned his

Keyblade and jabbed it out at Ven. "You're strong enough now to fulfill your purpose. So why don't you join with me? Right here and now. Become the χ -Blade."

"No, I won't do it. He told me the only way the χ -Blade can be forged is if you and me fight. Well, guess what? I'm not fighting," Ven said, his back still turned.

Yeah. As long as I can stay out of a fight, he'll never be able to create that χ -Blade.

"You used to be too broken to talk back," Vanitas retorted.

A sudden pain raced through Ven's temples. What was it?

What am I seeing in my mind—are these memories of my birth? No, Vanitas's birth.

"Fine. Then I'll give you a reason to fight."

The pain subsided at last, and Ven turned to face Vanitas.

"Come and find me...at the one and only place to spawn the χ -Blade: the Keyblade Graveyard."

Ven didn't know that place, and he was about to say so until Vanitas continued.

"There, you're gonna see me choke the life out of Terra and Aqua. Then we'll see how long you play the pacifist."

Terra and Aqua are gonna die? Not on my watch!

"Wait!"

A black mist arose from Vanitas's body, but as Ven instinctively moved toward him, the boy vanished.

Ven was alone with the sound of waves.

If Terra and Aqua were to die, it would be Ven's fault to an extent. He was one of the reasons they were fighting, and partially responsible for creating the turmoil through the worlds.

That was why he should be the one to put an end to it all.

Ven removed his Wayfinder from his pocket and looked at it.

It's time to go—I have to do this.

No matter what happens, we'll always be friends.

Ven returned the symbol of the vow between him and his two friends and donned his armor. Then he put the world of Destiny Islands—the place where it all started—behind him.

The moment he entered the darkness between, Vanitas dropped to his knees and clutched his chest.

It hurts. Ugh, I feel awful. I'm gonna throw up. Vanitas tore off his mask and cast it aside.

Beneath the mask was a raven-haired boy, his face twisted in agony as sweat beaded on his brow.

Unable to bear it any longer, Vanitas vomited on the spot and spat

out a black mass. The mass twitched, and a red eye rose up on it, glinting. It was trying to become one of *them*. Vanitas smashed it with a fist, and the inky lump splattered and dispersed like mist.

That thing is a piece of me—of the darkness.

Vanitas flung himself down on his side.

I know.

I'll be stronger when this is over. And so will those things born from me.

This is the ritual I have to go through to make it happen.

The more I suffer, the stronger I become.

Hate, sadness, fear, jealousy, panic, suffering, envy, anxiety, pain, despair—all of them give me power.

Xehanort had said that a fixation on strength would lead you to the power of darkness.

He didn't get it, though.

That was nothing.

A pure power of darkness—and pure power of light.

Did the old man really believe in that? The heart was a nebulous enigma, always lurching toward one or the other. That was why a heart could be both dark and light. The fact was that pure light and pure darkness didn't exist.

Because of that, that very uncertainty was what led people into darkness—and made them strong. A genuinely dark heart drawn from another was actually nothing more than one with a high level of purity. In the same way, the supposedly pure heart of Ventus also harbored darkness.

I can sense Ventus's heart, too.

The more he wavers between light and darkness—and the brighter he shines for it—the stronger the darkness grows in my heart.

A lust for strength didn't even scratch the surface of true darkness.

True darkness was right next to a brilliant source of light. The brighter the light, the deeper the darkness.

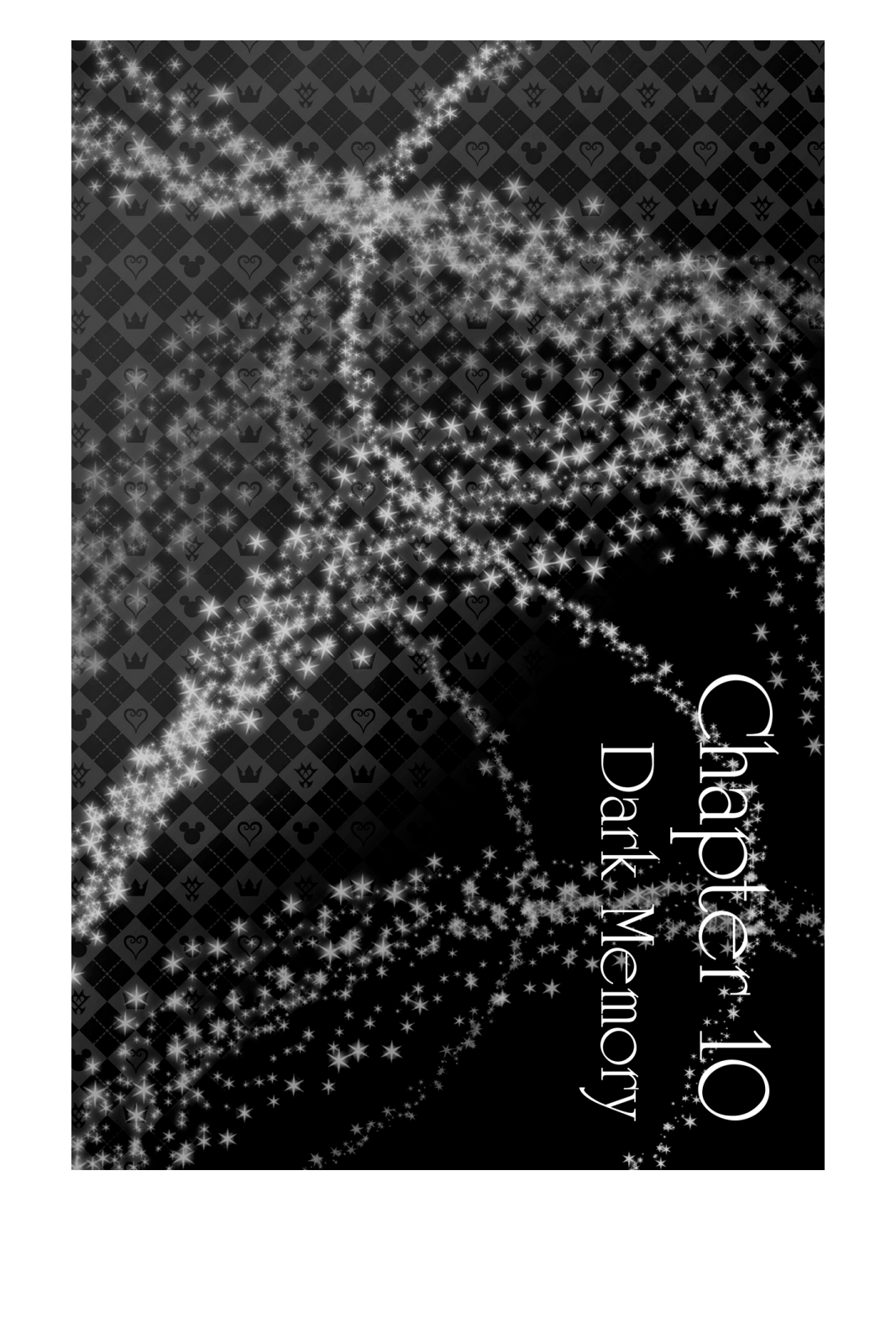
I've been jealous of Ventus since that day—the day I was born.

That's what makes the power of my darkness grow.

A sharp pain shot through Vanitas's chest. It was followed by an ongoing ache.

One of them must have destroyed another part of me somewhere.

Okay, it's time to move. I'll finally become myself—the χ-Blade. Let's go to the ancient battleground. The Keyblade Graveyard.



Chapter 10

Dark Memory

Chapter 10

Dark Memory

FOUR YEARS AGO...

Ventus was in a wasteland very close to the Keyblade Graveyard, surrounded by a pack of Heartless.

I'm scared.

"Please don't do this, Master. I'm not strong enough!" Ventus cried in obvious fear, a Keyblade in his hand. He was looking at Xehanort, his teacher, atop the cliff.

I can't do it. I don't stand a chance.

The Heartless crept nearer to Ventus. A black stain upon the ground spread, and then one, two more Heartless popped out from it.

Why is this happening to me?

The palm of Ventus's hand clutching the Keyblade was greasy with sweat.

"No. It is because you are trying to hold it in. Let the dark impulses waken in the pit of your heart. Release them, here and now! Sharpen your fear into rage!" Xehanort shouted to Ventus.

I don't know how to. There's nothing like that in me.

I can't change my fear into rage. I'm just scared.

"You must! If you do not let the storm within you run its course, it will wipe you from the face of the world, make no mistake! Do it. Embrace the darkness. Produce for your Master the χ -Blade!"

I can't win this. There's no way.

One of the Heartless lunged at Ventus. He barely defended himself from the attack, but the rest of the pack pounced at once, as if they had been waiting for the opening. Ventus practically disappeared

under the black mountain of Heartless.

I'm a goner...

"Ventus!" Xehanort shouted and leaped down from the precipice, his Keyblade flashing. One of the Heartless vanished.

Recognizing that it was Xehanort and not Ventus who was their true foe, the other Heartless moved away from Ventus all at once and positioned themselves around the Master.

Already unconscious, Ventus fell to the ground with a thud. Xehanort didn't even look in his direction as he dispatched the Heartless.

Once the last of them was defeated, Xehanort paced slowly toward the fallen boy.

"Really? You would rather die than use the power?"

Ventus was sprawled out facedown, and Xehanort gave him a slight kick to flip him onto his back. After peering into the boy's face for a moment, Xehanort then summoned his Keyblade to his hand once more and stabbed it downward at Ventus's chest. A ray of light pierced Ventus's body and caused his eyes to shoot open wide.

"If I must...I will extract the darkness from within you myself."

A translucent ball of light rose from Ventus's chest up into the air, until something pitch-black began to manifest around it.

The substance took on a spherical shape, almost like a large egg, and all at once, a boy clad in a black bodysuit and mask appeared within, clutching his legs to him in a fetal position.

The light left Ventus's eyes.

The boy uncurled his arms and legs, then landed lightly on the ground and looked at Xehanort.

He had no idea who this guy was. Didn't know who the guy laid out over there was, either.

I'm just kinda...sad.

Why am I sad?

"Empty creature from Ventus riven...to you, the name Vanitas shall be given."

"Yes, Master," replied the masked boy, Vanitas.

Xehanort laughed. "Now then, I must be going."

"Going where?"

"I will put Ventus to rest. I won't be gone long. You may do as you please."

Xehanort picked up the fallen Ventus and walked off.

A strong wind howled through the desolate landscape. Vanitas stared in a daze at his feet, then looked up at the sky. It was dull and overcast.

Vanitas gazed intently at his hand and curled it into a tight fist.

When he did, a large key appeared within it.

He gave it a swing and laughed inside his mask.

I'm scared.

Vanitas closed his eyes as the emotion swept over him. *This is a memory from Ventus's heart. And it's my feeling, too.* Fear could at times give rise to terrible power.

Yes, fear could sharpen into rage and in turn become strength, just as Xehanort had said. However, this time, the emotion gave birth to something far more special.

I learned where I came from while I was being born.

I'm a dark heart given shape. A vessel of negative emotions.

Something like a black shadow arose from Vanitas's body. When he glanced up at it, two red eyes flashed within the shadowy mass as it became a monster.

"Unversed."

Vanitas extended his hand, and the creature bobbed up and down around him in apparent delight.

It was emotion incarnate. An extremely immature being. No, "being" might be overstating it. If it was alive at all, then that life was merely a fragment of his, borrowed by this callow, unversed thing.

With a flash, Vanitas chopped down at the Unversed using his Keyblade. The abrupt attack felled it in an instant.

I don't want this.

The thought was accompanied by a twinge of pain in Vanitas's chest, a fragment of the emotion of the short-lived Unversed. Vanitas looked at the palm of his hand, then balled it up.

I'm lonely.

His shadow behind him was born into another Unversed.

A wind blew across the wasteland. The evening sun set in the distance, and the sky transitioned from dusk into the dark of night.

Finding it hard to breathe, Vanitas clutched his chest and dropped to his knees. Several Unversed dragged themselves forth into the world from his body.

It hurts.

The pain was so great that Vanitas tore off his mask to reveal a doll-like face with jet-black skin and red eyes, just like the Unversed, and contorted with agony.

Hey, where am I?

The voice came out of nowhere, and Vanitas felt his field of vision shrink.

Darkness clouded his eyes. He couldn't see anything. He was in true darkness, untouched by even the smallest sliver of light.

Vanitas collapsed upon the ground, gasping for shallow breaths.

What's happening to me?

He couldn't make heads or tails or anything of what came next. He thought he heard a voice from somewhere, but maybe it was just the wind. No, waves? Heartbeats? Suddenly, light appeared in the distance, swelling and swelling until it engulfed Vanitas.

It's time to wake up now. All we need to do is open the door.

He awoke as if from a nightmare at the unknown voice.

All he knew was that something had happened to Ventus.

Maybe—no, *definitely* something special.

Ventus was supposed to be an empty shell robbed of his heart—had he recovered what had been taken from him...?

How? Did someone help him? Who?

It was probably a newborn heart, just like mine.

This is just a wasteland. What I heard was the wind. Not waves at all. With a slight shake of his head, Vanitas touched his lips and realized something was very wrong.

The world was clearly different from the way it had been just moments ago. *Did the world—no, me...Ventus—transform somehow?*

When Vanitas stood up, his visage had turned into a boy's, nothing like the Unversed. It greatly resembled that of a youth who, in fifteen years, would come to be known as a hero of light.

His new journey wouldn't begin just yet. Now was the beginning of an endless darkness.

Vanitas twisted the boy's face into the barest hint of a smile.

The night was ending when Xehanort returned with Ventus to the wasteland near the Keyblade Graveyard. The breaking light of dawn shone over the boy as he walked up in a daze.

"Hey, you're back."

Vanitas grinned as he took in the sight of Ventus, who stood with his head lowered. Ventus stepped back in fright, then crouched down clutching his head.

"What's the matter?"

Vanitas kicked Ventus in the side, sending him tumbling to the

dirt with a yelp.

He'd definitely gotten his heart back, but the kid was still a shell of his former self.

Vanitas looked down at Ventus, moaning in a ball.

I hate him.

He despised Ventus, though he wasn't exactly sure why. With the surge of emotion, darkness swelled up behind Vanitas and birthed an Unversed.

"My. What have we here?" Xehanort exclaimed, observing the creature.

"An Unversed. They're monsters that come from pieces of my emotions."

"Excellent."

Vanitas didn't see what was so excellent about it.

I'm angry.

"Don't excite him, Vanitas."

Xehanort shot Vanitas a glare as he strode over to Ventus and helped him up. His golden eyes glinted sharply.

"Excite him? Why shouldn't I? He's me. And didn't you just say you liked the Unversed? What happened to putting this loser to rest?"

"The situation has changed. Ventus's heart is not so weak."

"Whatever," Vanitas spat. So Xehanort didn't know what really happened to Ventus.

Someone somewhere had completed the boy's heart, but Xehanort had reached the conclusion that Ventus's own resilience was the cause.

And that offended Vanitas, too.

He's undeniably a part of me, so why do I hate the kid so much?

"Get out of the way. I'll get rid of him myself." Vanitas summoned his Keyblade into his hand.

"Wait. We don't know what will happen to you if he meets his end."

"So now what? If I have to be around him, I know I'm gonna end up snuffing him out." His Keyblade still at the ready, Vanitas looked at Ventus, whose face remained twisted with pain.

"Then I know just the place for him."

"You're gonna lug him off somewhere else, then? Man, glad he means so much to you." Vanitas laughed.

"Both you and Ventus are necessary to my plan."

"Your plan, huh?"

Without giving his opinion one way or the other, Vanitas

dismissed his Keyblade and looked at Xehanort. He didn't have any intention of being used in this man's schemes. While the remnants of Ventus's memories told him that Ventus had a certain amount of respect for Xehanort as his master, things were different with Vanitas himself.

"Have it your way, Master," Vanitas shot out, then turned his back on the other two and walked away.

"Where are you going?"

"Relax, I'll stay on this world."

Behind Vanitas, the Unversed followed after like his attendants.

What would it take to get rid of this anger? Why was I ever born?

Vanitas gritted his teeth and scowled. *Will my doubts ever go away someday?*

Thinking that he would at least lay the broken boy to rest in a peaceful place, Xehanort had headed to his former home, the Destiny Islands, and the seaside where he had made his decision to leave it all behind.

He didn't know why that place had come to mind. He hadn't returned to it once since his departure, and not a single thing had changed.

It was tiresome and dull, silent but for the whispering tide.

There, at least Ventus would be able to rest quietly, he had thought.

But instead of remaining in a wakeless sleep, the boy had raised a Keyblade to the sky. The light of his broken heart had not been extinguished.

In that case, Xehanort should have been able to produce the χ -Blade by cultivating the remaining light in Ventus and the dark within Vanitas, and then bringing them together.

Unfortunately, Ventus had fallen unconscious once again when he made contact with Vanitas upon their return to the badlands.

It would seem Vanitas's dark heart was still too strong for Xehanort to work with both of them at the same time.

In that case, he could think of only one solution:

Ventus would be prepared elsewhere.

And for nurturing a heart of light, there was only one place. He would give the boy over to Eraqus, his former friend who believed in the light as the ultimate good and was the legitimate successor of a Keyblade Master.

Thus it was that Xehanort and Ventus found themselves before the manor on his old training grounds. This special place guarded by the legitimate successor, the Land of Departure, was where he would find

his onetime friend and fellow apprentice.

It was the first time Xehanort had visited since he left. That wasn't surprising. He didn't recall how many years it had been since he left his own home. Maybe this trip into the past was destiny, ushered in by his meeting with Ventus.

The boy hadn't yet taken on a clear identity again, but he could still stand on his own and obey instructions.

"Let's go."

Ventus didn't respond to the order, but when Xehanort started to walk, the boy was capable of trailing after him.

Xehanort opened the doors of the building. Eraqus met Xehanort at the bottom of the steps leading to the hall, as if he had known all along that Xehanort would be coming.

"Xehanort..."

"It has been some time, Eraqus. I wish to ask a favor of you."

"...Let us talk inside," Eraqus suggested. Nodding, Xehanort started forward. After a moment, his friend asked, "What request could you possibly have for me, Xehanort?"

There was a large scar on his old friend's face when he looked back. Xehanort had given it to him when he left this land.

"That boy, Ventus—I want you to care for him."

"And for what reason?"

Xehanort shook his head quietly at the question. "I went astray, Eraqus. I once sought the χ -Blade, but my efforts to create it only destroyed Ventus's heart. His memory was lost along with his heart, and now he is an empty husk. It pains me to see him so broken, and I am old. My guilt will eventually crush me."

After giving his uninterrupted account, Xehanort took Eraqus's hand and peered into his eyes.

"This boy is my sin," he pressed. "That is why I wish to leave him in the care of your light. I fear the darkness will take hold of me once more in my quest to glean the truth of the χ -Blade. I beg you, Eraqus, heed the request of an old man. This is my amends to you, to the world, and to this child. I shall live out the remainder of my days in some remote corner of the world."

"Xehanort..." Eraqus was overjoyed.

"Eraqus, my friend, you are the only one I can turn to."

At that moment, a cry, almost a scream, interrupted them. It was from Ventus.

What on earth had happened?

Xehanort and Eraqus nodded at each other, then headed to the entrance.

There they found Ventus curled up and cradling his head next to two nervous people, likely Eraqus's pupils.

“What did you do?!” Eraqus barked with reproach. Xehanort passed between the two students and helped Ventus up. The sight of him completely insensate was the exact image of how he had been when he came into contact with Vanitas.

“Nothing! I—I just asked him some stuff.”

The behavior of the young man caught Xehanort’s attention. He detected just the tiniest hint of darkness. It reminded Xehanort of himself back when he had been trained alongside Eraqus, although it was so faint he wondered if he was making too much of it.

“Ventus cannot tell you anything...because he cannot remember anything,” Eraqus stated.

“Xehanort, I will heed your request. Ventus will stay under my care.”

“...My friend—my brother, I am grateful.”

Eraqus knelt down in front of Xehanort, gathered Ventus up in his arms, and stood. “Terra, lay Ventus down in one of the empty bedrooms.”

“Understood, Master Eraqus.”

Eraqus passed Ventus over to his male pupil—Terra. The young man looked at Ventus first with gentle kindness, and then with slight unease.

Xehanort could sense from his disposition that he desired strength, and that this fixation would likely birth darkness in his heart.

Exactly what Xehanort needed for his vessel.

After he had resigned himself to beginning his search anew, to think he would find a vessel here, of all places...

Xehanort had originally taken Ventus as his student so that he might discard his aging, decaying frame and house his heart in a new vessel.

Ventus had proven too mild-mannered for that, however. An excess of kindness was nothing short of weakness. That was why he had elected to remove the darkness from the boy’s heart, splitting him into halves of pure light and pure darkness.

Yes, his goal was actually twofold now:

The χ-Blade, and the young body he needed to live on.

“I’ll go make the bed.”

“Thank you, Aqua.”

The female student, Aqua, ran up the stairs, and Terra gently went up after her, cradling Ventus as if he was afraid he would break.

Once they were gone, Eraqus turned to Xehanort. He rubbed the scar on his cheek for the briefest of moments and then closed his eyes, perhaps remembering the past, then finally spoke with a gentle smile.

“I look forward to the day we can speak again, Xehanort.”

“Yes, as do I,” Xehanort responded, then chuckled.

Vanitas felt a stirring in Ventus's heart, and then it stopped all at once. The incessant winds whipping across the earth had fallen still at the same time. He looked up at the sky.

The situation had changed again—Xehanort must have done something.

Meanwhile, the “plan” Xehanort had mentioned was bothering him.

Why was I born? Why was I made? Where did Ventus go? And what do I do now?

I'm nervous.

His formless anxiety about the future created another Unversed from Vanitas's body.

Just looking at the feebly twitching creature made him angry—and another Unversed was born. It upset him, like he was seeing his own weakness, and this of course produced more of them.

Vanitas summoned his Keyblade to his hand and took it to the Unversed scabbling around him. Pain tore through his body as he brought it down. This was the second time he had defeated one of the creatures himself.

Vanitas lashed out at the other Unversed.

I don't want to go away.

Spare me.

It hurts so much.

I hate him.

So many emotions poured into him along with the pain. The influx of feelings brought with it more pain, which in turn spawned more Unversed. *Defeating them will make me stronger. It means the more I hurt these pieces of myself, the tougher I'll become—and my Unversed with me.*

Pain and hate and suffering will be my power.

The dark heart he'd been left with was so miserable. *Why am I the only one who has to suffer? He pushed all his misery off on me, and now he's off doing what? Sleeping?*

I'm jealous.

A black mass on another magnitude from before floated up out of Vanitas and became an enormous Unversed.

The gigantic creature then flew off.

Vanitas bit down on the inside of his cheek as he watched it go, then closed his eyes, trying to sense Ventus and his now-still heart. He couldn't feel anything. That meant Ventus himself wasn't feeling

anything at the moment.

Wish I could be numb like that, too. We used to be one, so why did we have to get separated? I'd probably feel a little better, at least, if we were together again. It's Xehanort's fault for tearing us apart, but he's the only one who gets to feel good. He doesn't have to deal with all this pain.

I envy him.

Vanitas despised Ventus—loathed him.

The stream of Unversed emerging from him also upset him.

What would it take for me to escape all of this?

And so the days dragged idly by. Ventus's heart did not awaken.

The only means Vanitas had of relieving his boredom was dispatching the Unversed. Each time, it created a jolt of pain in his body. The pain fed his hatred toward the world—toward Ventus. And when the hate filled him, the Unversed were born.

It hurts.

Doing away with the Unversed was tantamount to inflicting pain upon himself.

Why am I suffering so much? Why won't Ventus wake up?

Xehanort must have seen the state Vanitas was in.

Sometimes the pain caused him to collapse in the wasteland, even lose consciousness entirely. When he woke up, his cheeks were wet. He was sad and lonely and miserable. But he didn't know what it was to be all those things. He had no idea, which was why he did away with still more Unversed.

He didn't know what else to do. If he didn't snuff out these creatures, he wouldn't be able to feel anything at all.

My hate makes me stronger, but it feels so horrible.

He defeated an Unversed. The wound brought pain with it. He fell to the ground. Dust drifted around him.

"You truly are a marvel—Vanitas," Xehanort said as he walked up to the boy moaning on hands and knees.

"What's so marvelous about it?" Vanitas asked between ragged breaths. *What part of me is a "marvel"? All I do is create these hideous things.*

Vanitas wrapped his arms around himself as an especially powerful spasm of pain assaulted him. The agony was choking him.

"You must suffer more and more," the old man said, turning to leave.

Vanitas slowly got to his feet behind Xehanort. "...No."
Xehanort turned back toward the muttering at his back.
"No. Why am I the only one who has to go through this?"
The old man exploded into laughter at Vanitas's question.
"What's so funny?"

He thought of how much the inside of his chest ached and ached and ached, and tears poured down his cheeks.

I can't take this anymore.

"I'll tell you how to end your torment—become the χ-Blade."

"...χ-Blade?" Vanitas asked desperately.

"If you and your counterpart cultivate your strengths and then do battle, the χ-Blade will be forged. The χ-Blade shall free you from your pain—free the entire world."

Vanitas couldn't care less about the world, as long as he was delivered from this agony.

"To this end, Vanitas, you must hone both body and mind."

With those parting words, Xehanort turned away from Vanitas.

If I become the χ-Blade one day, I'll be free of this torment.

It was a goal—a purpose. A single ray of light shining in the darkness.

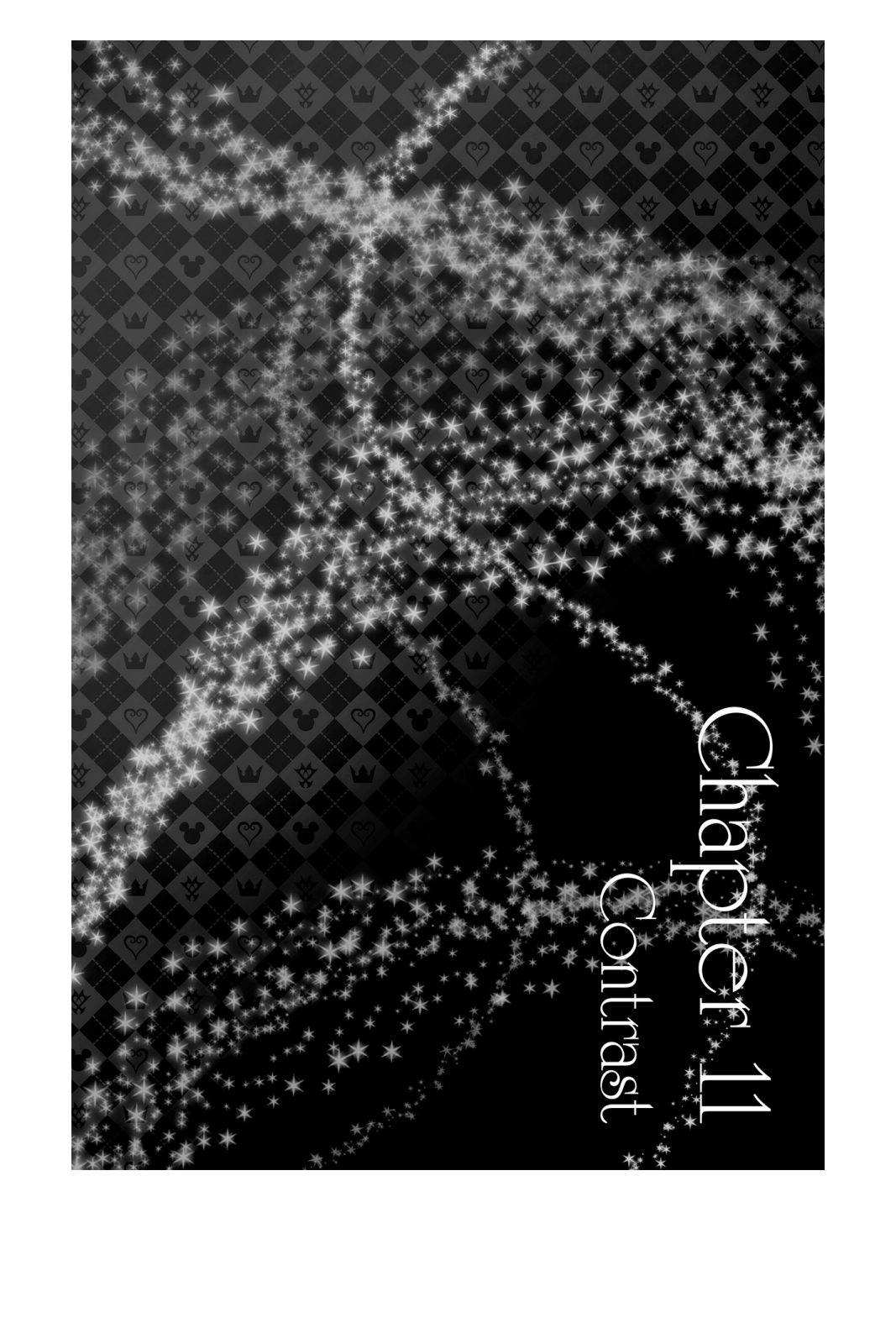
Why won't you wake up?

Then, far away—very far away—Vanitas felt Ventus's heart stir ever so slightly.

Does that mean the two of us are connected?

His heart was still asleep—but it had begun to move. *So I have to get to work, too.*

And then one day, I'll become the χ-Blade.



Chapter 11

Contrast

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Contrast

VENTUS WAS SITTING UP IN A STUPOR ATOP THE BED WHERE HE HAD AWAKENED.

“Does it hurt anywhere?” Aqua asked.

There was no response from Ventus.

Master Eraqus and Terra had come running, and they stood behind her as she peered into his face and tried again.

“Are you in pain?”

“...”

“Are you hungry?”

While the last question didn’t get a verbal response, Ventus did incline his head a bit.

“I still have some of that cake I made yesterday, so I’ll bring it over.” Aqua trotted out of the bedroom.

“You got a sweet tooth? If you don’t, let her know now,” Terra said, patting Ventus lightly on the shoulder in apparent relief that he’d come back to his senses.

Ventus still stared at nothing, though. Aqua returned, carrying a tray bearing a white sponge cake decorated with crystal sugar.

“Eating cake in bed isn’t exactly good manners, but I think we can let it slide today, Ventus,” Aqua said to him with a chuckle.

The boy still didn’t react.

Regardless, Aqua cut off a bite-sized piece of the cake with a fork and held it up to Ventus’s mouth. His head slowly revolved to look at her, like he was some mechanical automaton.

“There you go, now open wide. C’mon, I’m sure this’ll perk you right up.”

When Aqua opened her mouth to demonstrate, Ventus lightly opened his as well. When Aqua slid the piece of cake inside, Ventus closed his lips over it and chewed slowly.

“Pretty sweet, huh?” Terra offered.

While he didn’t respond to Terra, Ventus did open his mouth again.

“Guess that means you like it. Good. Do you think you can you eat

all by yourself?" Aqua asked.

Ventus went still.

She handed him the plate and fork, and while he didn't vocalize anything, Ventus did accept them and began shoveling cake into his mouth.

"Oh, good..."

"It seems the boy's mind is still rather muddled. Let's not push him too hard. Our care for him should be gentle and gradual."

"Yes, sir."

Terra and Aqua both bowed at Master Eraqus's instructions.

"Just enjoy that sugary cake of Aqua's and rest up for today," Terra advised.

"Terra always complains that Aqua's cakes are too sweet, but I admit I enjoy them. Don't you, Ventus?" Master Eraqus said with a stroke of his beard.

Terra gave a small sigh and shook his head. "You enjoy them too much, Master."

"No, you simply enjoy them too little."

"They're just not my favorite! It's not like I *hate* cake..."

As Terra and Master Eraqus went at it, Aqua giggled next to them. "You like cake just fine if it has nuts in it, Terra. And if it's not too sweet. Master, will you have some, too?"

"Of course." Master Eraqus nodded rather contentedly.

"And Terra, I made sure to leave off the crystal sugar on some of it, just for you," she told him.

"Well, in that case..." Terra said with relief.

Beside the other three, Ventus quietly munched on his cake.

In the wind-whipped wasteland, Vanitas clutched his knees and closed his eyes. The stirrings in Ventus's heart were terribly sluggish. In fact, he couldn't really tell if it was moving at all.

And yet, he could still perceive a strange temperate warmth, like lukewarm water pouring into his chest. However, instead of heating him up, it created an almost instant chill inside his heart.

In fact, it left him colder than he'd been before the water.

Vanitas could sense the Unversed around him, but the only sound in his ears was the wind.

The impulses of hatred and sorrow within Vanitas hadn't flowed out of him, as if they were attuned to the lethargic movements of Ventus's heart. The days merely passed in a haze.

Maybe these days of inactivity were the dominion of the darkness?

Vanitas had no idea when the worlds would make their move, either. He could only believe the future he'd been allotted was very bleak indeed.

He possessed but one sole, singular hope—the χ-Blade.

As always, Terra and Aqua practiced their swordplay beside a pond partway up the trail to the mountaintop outside the castle.

Well, it wasn't swords they held but wooden blades—Keyblades. Both of them used these practice weapons fashioned in the shape of Keyblades in their training.

Ventus observed absentmindedly from where he sat on a bench. Actually, it was hard to tell if he was truly watching them.

A small bird swooped down toward his feet. It hopped onto his foot, then onto his knee before finally stopping on his shoulder. Ventus didn't react at all.

Terra and Aqua saw this and shared a glance.

While Ventus had proven himself capable of taking care of his needs and doing what he was told, he never acted of his own volition.

Unless Terra, Aqua, or Master Eraqus said otherwise, he would spend the entire day staring into space, and the biggest thing was that he never spoke.

"Ventus!" Terra called.

The little bird flitted off, and Ventus looked at Terra.

"Let's take a break."

Aqua stopped as well, then approached the bench. She picked up the basket she'd left by his feet and graced him with a smile. "Ta-daa!" She pulled out some small cupcakes from within. "I put in lots of wild nuts and big almonds today."

"—Just the way I like 'em." Terra accepted one of the snacks from Aqua.

"And here's yours, Ventus." She handed a cupcake to the boy.

He stared intently at the treat.

"Go on, try it," she prompted.

Ventus brought the cake to his mouth, and Terra took a bite of his at the same time.

"Oh, man, this is good. I swear, Aqua, this is the one girly thing about you."

"And what is this 'one' girly thing about me, exactly?"

"Like how you love sweets and baking cakes. C'mon, Ventus, back me up."

Terra sought his affirmation, but Ventus merely ate his cake in silence.

"That's not true, is it? Some guys like sweets, too. Like the Master, for instance."

"Speaking of the Master, yesterday he said it was about time we started Ventus's training, too," Terra said, and wiped his mouth after wolfing down his cupcake.

“Ventus’s training?” Aqua asked, slightly apprehensive.

“Should we give it a shot?”

Terra gave the wooden Keyblade he held to Ventus. The boy gazed at the practice weapon, then flipped it into a reverse grip and stood from the bench.

“That’s an interesting way to hold it. Okay, let’s do this.”

Aqua watched the other two to make sure nothing went wrong.

The moment Terra raised his wooden Keyblade, Ventus staggered. The practice weapon fell to the ground, and the boy cradled his head.

“Ventus!”

Aqua rushed up and caught him just before he could keel over.

Ventus was unconscious, just as he’d been when he first arrived.

I'm scared.

Vanitas gasped and gripped his chest as the sudden wave of intense emotion swept over him with stabbing pain.

Was this—Ventus?

He couldn't think of anything else. But soon, he felt nothing at all.

What remained was a slight lingering ache. Vanitas exhaled deeply as he got his breathing back under control.

Ventus's heart had gone still again, but something was definitely happening to it.

Vanitas could also sense the stirrings of another much, much younger heart.

“Don’t let it get you down, Terra.”

Aqua encouraged her friend as she leaned against a wall with her arms crossed, her gaze lowered.

“I shouldn’t have done that while the Master wasn’t there.”

It was rare for Terra to be this upset about something. The only time he ever acted this way was after a scolding from Master Eraqus.

It must have been a shock to be responsible for someone fainting. Neither of them had ever harmed anyone by their own hands. They were still trainees, after all.

“Don’t you think the Master’s lecture was enough punishment?”

Aqua knelt down by Ventus’s bedside and softly touched the sleeping boy’s brow.

She wondered why he had fallen as soon as he took hold of the wooden blade. Maybe it had something to do with his lost memories?

Aqua carefully observed Ventus as he slept. She wasn’t especially concerned; she had a feeling he would awaken soon. Why was that? Maybe intuition?

“I’m sure he’ll wake up any time now...Hey! See?”

As if on cue, Ventus’s eyes had slowly opened.

“Ventus!” Terra called out his name and came up alongside the bed.

Next to him, Aqua gently looked Ventus over and asked, “Are you all right? Do you feel sick at all?”

With Aqua’s help, Ventus sat up gradually, holding his forehead.

A slightly confused look came over his face. He peered intently at the two of them. “A...qua...Ter...ra?” he said.

“That’s right! Aqua and Terra. Oh, I’m so glad you’re back with us.”

Overjoyed that he was not only awake but had said their names, Aqua gave Ventus a hug.

“Master! Ventus is awake!” Terra called exuberantly.

“I see you’ve returned, Ventus.” Master Eraqus smiled when he arrived at the room.

“Yes...and he called us by our names,” Aqua announced as she stood.

Master Eraqus nodded with pleasure. “Did he? We’re making a bit of progress, then. But, still we must not rush him.”

“Yes, Master,” Terra answered quietly. Ventus regarded their interaction with a hint of puzzlement.

Xehanort loomed over Vanitas, his Keyblade in hand.

“Come at me, boy. Your tempering has only begun.”

As Vanitas got to his feet with a groan, Xehanort lunged toward him in a flash and kicked him in the jaw.

Vanitas went crashing to the ground again.

During Xehanort’s occasional returns to this ancient battleground, he would beat Vanitas with his Keyblade and then leave.

The solitude cultivated his loathing and made him stronger.

That was why Vanitas had been abandoned here. But it still wasn’t enough. It wasn’t enough, and that in turn was why the Master needed to return at times for training.

While Vanitas did sometimes cry out and weep, this time he merely gritted his teeth and got to his feet again.

It was impossible to deny that a dark heart could become full to bursting with sadness and loneliness. Still, that was far from strength. Such feelings could be left to the Unversed.

What Vanitas needed to acquire was overwhelming power. And that called for isolation and hatred.

True darkness lay beyond his dried tears.

“Now, Vanitas, let your hatred grow. Turn it loose upon everything in this world.”

Unversed emerged from the boy kneeling on the ground. Xehanort chuckled as he watched.

Ventus was absentmindedly watching Terra and Aqua's training in the great hall again today.

"Strike harder! That wasn't enough for a real Keyblade!" the Master shouted as Terra was knocked back. Aqua was next. Though the two of them tried their hardest, they were no match for their teacher.

"I'm ready!" Aqua got back to her feet and challenged the Master once more. Her wooden sword went flying and tumbled near Ventus's feet.

He was supposed to just stay sitting there, but Ventus rose from his chair and picked up the weapon. It was the first time anyone had seen him do anything of his own will without a prompt from someone else.

"...Ventus?" Aqua spoke up uneasily.

Ventus looked at the wooden blade he had scooped up, only to switch it to the reverse grip he'd used when he collapsed before.

The Master and Terra stopped in their tracks and observed the boy. Ventus gave the wooden weapon a big swing.

"Would you like to give it a try, Ventus?"

When the Master called out to him, Ventus leaped. The seasoned warrior easily parried the boy's strike, but the sight was enough to tell him that Ventus had once received training in some form.

"Good. Now, once more. You have potential."

Ventus dashed forward again at the Master's words. He struck the Master's Keyblade with a nice rhythm, until he was eventually sent reeling.

"Are you all right, Ventus?" The Master extended a hand to the boy and helped him to his feet.

Ventus gave a small nod.

"Well, then, you will be joining us for practice beginning tomorrow."

The Master patted the boy on the head. Though Ventus's expression was as empty as ever, Terra and Aqua ran up to him in joy.

"You're pretty good, Ventus."

"I was so surprised when you just picked up that sword."

Ventus stared at the practice blade clutched in his hand as the two hovered around him.

"Now then, how about we end our training here for today?" the Master said with a smile on his lips.

"Looks like it's time for snacks," Aqua declared with a grin.

"What have you concocted for us today, Aqua?" Master Eraqus stroked his beard and asked with a grin.

“Today I have Dancin’ Lemon cake. It’s not too sweet, so I’m sure Terra will like it, too.”

In a slight daze, Ventus still held on to the wooden sword off to the side. Terra watched him with a slightly uneasy look.

On the peak of the mountain in the evening sun, Terra worked his knife on a carving in the hilt of his favorite wooden Keyblade. He had made the weapon himself some time ago.

The movements of his hand were swift and sure.

“Terra!”

Aqua came up the mountain and looked at what was in his hand. Ventus was behind her.

“What’re you up to? Personalizing your blade again?”

“Yeah.” Terra nodded, then held his beloved weapon up to the sunset.

“Terra made that one himself,” Aqua said with an arm around Ventus’s shoulders. The boy gazed at Terra’s hands curiously. Just as Aqua baked cakes, Terra was known to do some woodworking from time to time.

“...Okay, that should do it.”

It would probably fit his hand now. A little adjustment would be necessary, but it would be perfect before they knew it.

“Are you done?”

“Done enough for today,” Terra replied and set the wooden sword to one side. Aqua prompted Ventus to sit next to Terra, then sat herself down on the other side of the boy.

The waning sunlight fell over the trio.

Ventus gazed emptily at his own hands, paying no mind to the sunset. Or maybe he was gazing emptily at nothing at all.

“Have you gotten used to the Master’s training, Vents...Venus...Ven?”

When Terra suddenly shortened Ventus’s name, Aqua let out a *pf*ft. “What was that?” Her shoulders shook as she lowered her head, unable to hold in her giggles.

“...Uh, guess it’s just a little unusual,” Terra replied curtly, maybe a bit embarrassed.

Ventus looked at Aqua, perhaps not sure what was going on.

“Is it really that funny to you?”

Aqua couldn’t contain herself, and Terra scowled at her.

“Oh, come on...!” Aqua was laughing like it was one of the funniest things she’d ever heard, but she finally got herself under control and wiped away her tears. “I guess ‘Ventus’ is a little hard to remember.”

Aqua gave Ventus a long look.

Ventus lowered his gaze as he realized he was under scrutiny.

Pleased with himself, Terra spoke up. "Right? Plus, Ven doesn't sound so formal."

"Ven...Yeah, maybe Ven is better," Aqua replied, and Terra put an arm around Ven.

"Whatcha think, Ven?"

Ventus—Ven—gave a small nod.

"Good. From now on, you'll be Ven."

Aqua placed a hand on the boy's knee.

The evening sun shone upon the three of them.

While Terra and Aqua clashed with their practice swords nearby, Master Eraqus carefully guided Ventus's stance and how he held his blade.

"Good. This is a defensive stance. There is no offense without defense," the Master said as he adjusted Ventus's position with the weapon over his head.

Ven listened earnestly to Master Eraqus's words.

Though he still didn't speak much, he was far different from before.

"I once sought the χ-Blade, but my efforts to create it only destroyed Ventus's heart."

Xehanort's words ran through the Master's mind.

He had said that Ventus was the result of an attempt to produce the χ-Blade.

Legend said the χ-Blade was a mix of light and darkness, though Xehanort had not gone into the specifics of exactly how it was forged.

Perhaps all of it lay concealed within Ventus now.

"Master! Can we take a break now?"

Aqua's call brought Master Eraqus back to the present.

"I suppose so. Let's take a breather," he replied, then quietly lowered Ventus's upraised hands.

"Today I have cherryberry tarts."

Aqua was beaming as she made her announcement, and Master Eraqus couldn't help but smile back.

"Berries, you say? Those are my favorite."

"...They sure aren't mine..." Terra hung his head off to the side. He wasn't terribly fond of fruit.

"I still have some of yesterday's Open Sesame cookies for you. Help me get the tea ready, Ven," Aqua prompted, and Ventus began to

walk. His footsteps were so sure he seemed like a different person from before.

He had recovered so much thanks to the efforts of Terra and Aqua. Eraqus was genuinely happy to see Ventus's ongoing rehabilitation.

However, he also knew he must be wary of the χ -Blade's secrets concealed within the boy.

Eraqus wasn't sure whether his concern was truly necessary. But for the moment, at least, Ventus had yet to recover his true heart, which meant strict vigilance was most likely unwarranted.

Fully restored, Ventus would become an unknown variable, but judging from his condition as he recuperated, there was no excess of darkness lurking in his heart.

That being the case, he doubted he would have any problems treating him as simply another pupil in his charge.

"You're quite the picky eater, Terra." Master Eraqus gave his student a light pat on the back as he approached.

"...It's only sweet stuff that I'm not into. How come you, Aqua, and Ven are so crazy about it?"

"I could turn the question back on you and ask why you aren't," Master Eraqus retorted with a smile, then strolled over to the dining hall with a spring in his step.

Terra started after him, a little gloomy.

Terra's wooden Keyblade sent Ven sprawling.

"Giving up already? C'mon, Ven. I thought you were stronger than that."

Terra smiled as he said this, not even out of breath.

"Ven, you almost had him. Just try it again!"

"Hey wait, you're teaming up now?" Terra slumped dramatically as he watched Ven get to his feet. "All right, bring it!"

He blocked Ven's strike. The boy still didn't talk at all, but he had changed greatly. Terra knocked Ven back again.

"Shall we take a break?"

Nodding at Aqua's suggestion, Terra lent Ven a hand and pulled him up. "No cake today?"

"I have it waiting in the dining hall since I thought we could share it with the Master later. You like Galactic Caramel pound cake, too, right?"

Terra and Aqua sat on the edge of the summit as they talked. Ven took a seat between them a moment later.

In his hand, he carefully held a wooden sword.

"Ven. You see all those dents and nicks you got?"

“Each one of those is proof you’re learning.”

Terra and then Aqua encouraged him, but Ven’s gaze remained slightly lowered, and he didn’t react.

“You’re trying too hard to move your body. You need to learn to let your body move you. Right?” Terra said, brandishing his blade.

As it happened, this wooden Keyblade was the finest of all the practice weapons Terra had made. He’d even carved his name into it.

Terra got to his feet and gave a dramatic *ahem*. “In your hand, take this blade. And as long as you have the makings, then through this simple act of taking, its wielder you shall one day be made.” He raised the wooden Keyblade aloft.

“What’s that about? Who went and made you Master?” Aqua said in exasperation.

“Being a Keyblade Master is all I’ve dreamed about.”

“Well, you’re not the only one,” Aqua said.

“I know.” Terra nodded, then held out the wooden Keyblade to Ven. “You, me, and Ven all share the same dream.”

Ven reached out and grabbed it. Terra thought he caught a hint of Ven’s very first smile, and he was glad to see it.

“Take it! It’s yours.”

He’d been wanting to give his handmade sword to Ven at some point during their training together. A Terra-sized Keyblade would be too big, though, which was why he had been fine-tuning it for so long.

“Huh?” Aqua exclaimed. “What about you?”

“I’ll use the one Ven was using for now and just make a new one.”

With that, Terra placed a hand on Ven’s head and ruffled his golden hair.

He could always make another one, and if Ven was happy, so was he.

“Hey, you hit the jackpot, Ven.” Aqua looked Ven in the face with a smile.

“...Thanks.”

Terra and Aqua looked at each other in shock. That was the last thing they expected to hear.

No doubt about it—the voice was Ven’s.

It was the first word he’d spoken.

“Ven!”

In near-perfect sync, Terra and Aqua both peered into Ven’s face, and the boy glanced back and forth between them with a surprised look of his own.

“...What’s wrong with you guys?”

“Ven...!”

Aqua hugged Ven tight. And Terra, beside them, kept mussing the boy’s hair.

“Cut it out, Terra, Aqua. What gives? Stop treating me like a little kid!” Ven grumbled.

Laughter spilled out of Aqua, then Terra, and finally Ven joined in as well.

For the very first time, the Land of Departure echoed with the laughter of all three apprentices.

The teeth-grinding noise grated on his ears.

Vanitas lowered his head, closed his eyes, and clenched his fists. A flood of something warm had poured into his heart all at once, bringing with it echoes of laughter. Right then, he could see through Ventus's eyes.

And the kid was laughing.

His consciousness was so clear he even knew the names of the two beside him.

The man was Terra and the woman was Aqua.

Ventus was between them, laughing.

So you're finally awake...

Vanitas stood and, unable to contain his fury, swung his Keyblade at an Unversed. The creature disappeared without a trace. A malice more intense than the pain it brought him turned the inside of his chest as black as pitch.

Who was the target of his enmity?

Ventus?

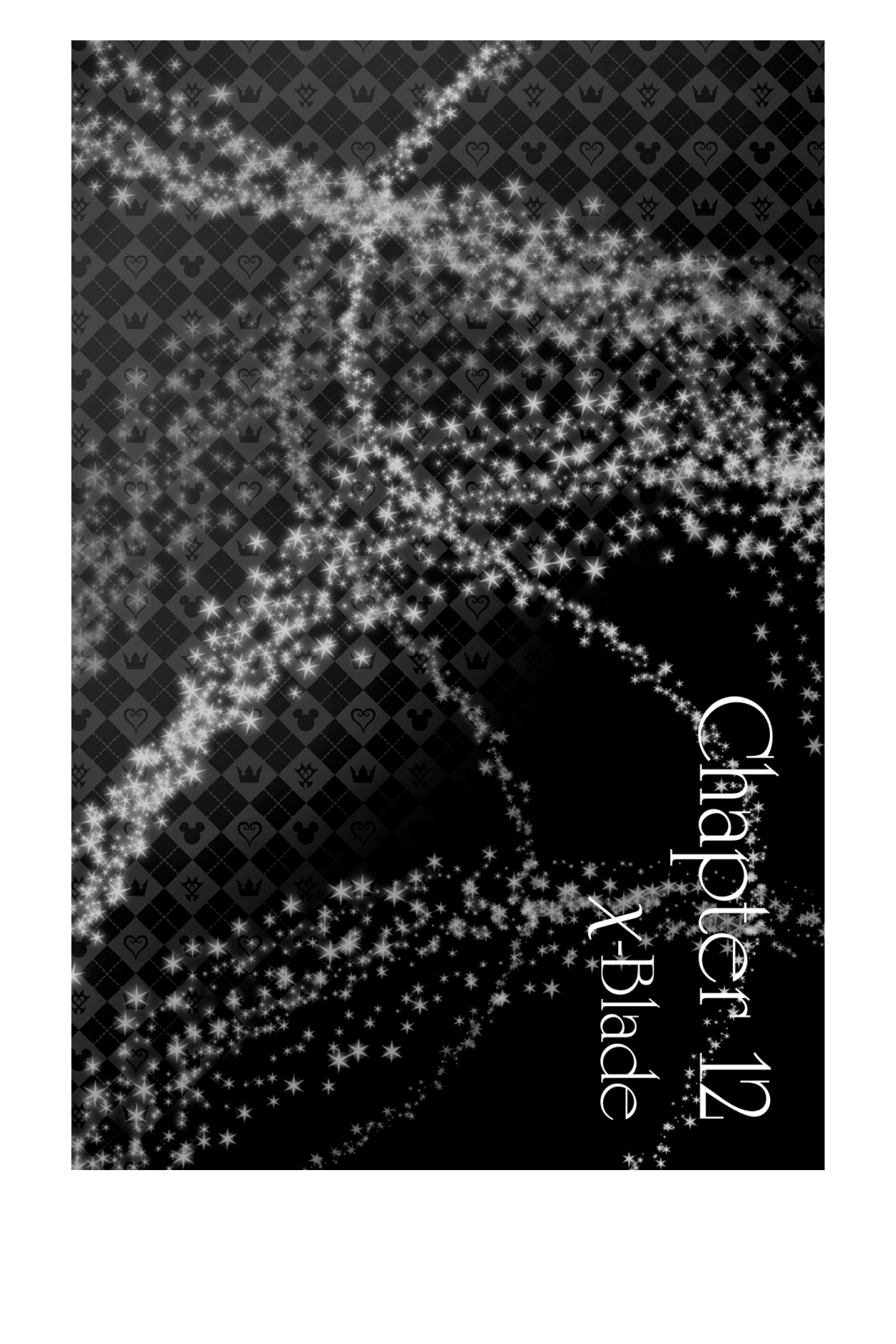
The whole world?

Maybe Xehanort?

The two laughing next to Ventus?

Vanitas didn't know. Maybe everything.

The boy stood alone in the wasteland.



Chapter 12

X-Blade

Chapter 12

x-Blade

“VEN!”

Mickey woke from his dream, calling out his friend’s name—and found himself in the same old Mysterious Tower.

Was it all a dream?

He gave a small shake of his head. Mickey was still a bit out of it. There was no way his whole journey could have been a figment of his imagination.

He’d encountered that boy in the mask, and then he’d been knocked out—and then what? Could the Star Shard have brought him here?

“King Mickey!” The voice calling out to him was a familiar one.

“Donald!”

Donald, his retainer and dear friend, came rushing up.

“King Mickey!” Behind him was Goofy. The two of them seemed nothing short of overjoyed.

“And Goofy, too! What’s happened?”

“We were so worried about you!” Donald embraced Mickey.

“You were out for so long.”

Unable to hold back his tears, Goofy rubbed at his eyes a bit.

“Their concern for you brought them all the way here.”

At the voice of his teacher, Yen Sid, Mickey jumped to his feet and hurried over before the big desk and snapped to attention, as if he was ready to give a salute.

“Master Yen Sid!”

“Taking the Star Shard without permission is a grave transgression, Mickey.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but—” Mickey began, but Yen Sid quietly shook his head.

“I know. You believed you had to intervene. I am well aware of the nature of your journey.”

“Thank you, Master. How did I get here? And I lost the Star Shard...”

"Aqua brought you here. She saved ya," said Goofy.

"She did?! Oh, right, I've gotta find Ven! And Aqua!"

"She has gone to the Keyblade Graveyard. I suspect Ven has done the same. And I assume you will be making your way there yourself, Mickey."

"Yes, Master Yen Sid."

Ven and Aqua, his two dear friends, were probably in trouble there. They'd helped him out, and Mickey was going to return the favor. He was well and free to do what he wanted. Of course he'd assist his friends in their hour of need.

"We'll go, too!" Donald took his magic staff in hand, but Mickey shook his head.

"No. While I'm gone, I've got a favor to ask you two."

"It's not holdin' down the fort again, is it...?" Goofy hung his head dejectedly.

"Sorry, fellas. But I want you to look after everyone while I'm away. I've gotta go now," Mickey told them admonishingly. Donald and Goofy looked at each other. "Plus, Minnie and Daisy are gonna get lonely if you leave, too."

"Well, if you put it that way...leave it to us!" Donald said with a thump on his chest.

"Mickey, it is possible you were fated to visit that land from the day you first took up your Keyblade," Yen Sid told him softly—both stern and kind.

"Master Yen Sid..."

"Be very careful."

"Yes, Master!"

With an energetic nod, Mickey left his esteemed teacher and trusted comrades as he took a decisive first step on his journey once again.

Now that Terra thought about it, it was under Master Xehanort's guidance that he came to this land before. He had no idea what was to be found here. What he did know was that this place was where those who took up Keyblades came to carve their fates.

As a Keyblade wielder himself, would his destiny be decided here, too?

I never did become a Master. I just have to keep moving forward, to atone for the awful things I've done.

With a look up at the heavy clouds overhead, Terra set off with firm strides across the soil.

Black, writhing whirlwinds arose in the gorge between the sheer cliffs, practically chasing after Terra.

The tornadoes themselves also resembled giant monsters.

Just as he realized one of them had swallowed him up, Terra found himself standing in a pitch-black space.

Before him was a strange realm where faraway things appeared near, and what was near appeared far. Unversed after Unversed attacked, much stronger than anything Terra had faced before.

As he did away with the beasts, it occurred to him that this gloom was a reflection of his own heart. The idea even crossed his mind that perhaps the Unversed were embodiments of his misdeeds and the darkness within him.

When Terra finished off all of the creatures, the distorted world vanished instantly, and he was spat out onto the wasteland and hit the ground. But then a second whirlwind engulfed him.

Bit by bit, Terra made his way forward, fighting Unversed each time a storm consumed him.

Once he had quelled the seventh storm, everything around him fell still.

Terra calmed himself and surveyed what lay ahead—a valley that became so narrow it was almost a small trail. Seeing light beyond the dim, sunless ravine, Terra took off running toward it.

The view opened up all at once.

“This is...”

Bizarre was the only word for it.

In the barren landscape stood hundreds—no, thousands, tens of thousands—of Keyblades. The weapons had lost their sheen, making it impossible to guess how long they had been there. They may very well have lingered here since some unimaginably distant era.

Keyblades possessed an intrinsic bond to their owners. Maybe these had lost their wielders?

Terra stood in place, dumbfounded.

As he felt a gust of wind blow through, Terra recognized a figure in the distance.

It was Aqua.

Just how long had she known he was there? Someone must have called her here—or else maybe...

Coming to a stop before him, Aqua lowered her blue eyes for a moment, then regarded Terra straightforwardly.

Then she said, “I was told...someone struck down Master Eraqus.”

Terra’s chest went tight. She must have known—and that was why she asked.

He looked away from her and her stare. Fessing up was part of his atonement.

That, and he didn’t have anything to hide from Aqua—Aqua and Ven. Not anymore.

“Yes...that’s right. I was stupid and helped Xehanort do it.”
Aqua gasped.

No way—what Master Yen Sid said was true?

Aqua gazed quietly at Terra’s profile as he refused to look at her. His expression was filled with utter anguish. There had to be some extenuating circumstance. Or maybe Terra had acted on someone’s orders?

“The Master—he tried to hurt Ven.”

It took a moment for what Terra said to register.

The Master hurt Ven? Why would he...?

“I only fought because I wanted to protect him.”

Terra still wouldn’t look at her. *What in the world happened, Terra?*

“But I was tricked. Xehanort set the whole thing up—”

Terra made a fist and shook his head softly.

What had Master Xehanort set up?

“—all so he could awaken the darkness inside me.”

At last, he faced her.

“You were right, Aqua—and so was Master Eraqus. I did need to be watched. I went astray—but no more.”

Now it was Aqua’s turn to avert her gaze.

Spreading through her was a feeling that was difficult to name—emptiness, perhaps. Sorrow, regret, anger, powerlessness.

How could this happen? Couldn’t you have done something? Why—?

She knew there was no point in bombarding Terra with questions.

I always believed in you, Terra. I wanted to believe, and now...

She knew Terra was upset with himself now. Still, that was no excuse...

Aqua squeezed her hands in front of her chest.

No. Embracing those feelings, breaking up their friendship—that was exactly what Xehanort wanted.

Aqua spoke softly. “What else is darkness but hate and rage? Xehanort is feeding the dark fires within you—making you fight. You’ll go astray again.”

She looked directly at Terra.

“Tell me—how does that honor our Master’s memory, Terra?”

What their Master had taught them about was light. The power of light—of believing.

That was why she chose to have faith in Terra in spite of everything.

It’ll be all right. After all, we’re one.

Just then, she heard a gust of wind, accompanied by small footsteps crunching on the pebbles.

Aqua and Terra raised their heads.
Ven...

He really was always the last to arrive when it counted.

Spotting Terra and Aqua a ways off, Ven ambled toward them at an unhurried pace. Hundreds, no, thousands of ownerless Keyblades were stuck in the earth.

He wondered what the two of them were discussing. What they had heard.

More importantly, though, there was something Ven had to tell them. He wasn't confident he could explain it well, not to mention he was unsure of what was happening to him himself. But still, he had to try.

Coming to a halt before Terra and Aqua, Ven looked about hesitantly and began. "Xehanort wants me and Vanitas to fight, and make some kind of 'χ-Blade.'"

He didn't know if he was putting it right, but he continued, staring at the ground.

"But the Master said we can't let that happen...and he tried to destroy me for it."

"χ-Blade?" Aqua repeated quietly.

Did she know about it?

"I still don't know exactly what it is. But...it scares me to death. Even just the thought of it."

Ven placed a hand on his chest. Something ached within it. *My heart—it's broken, but thanks to Aqua and Terra, it's fuller than anyone else's.*

No, not just the two of them. Thanks to all my friends.

"Relax, Ven. We're here and we're gonna take care of you," Terra said as he walked up to Ven and laid a hand on his shoulder. Next to Ven, Aqua also nodded her agreement.

That wasn't it—no. That wasn't what he was trying to say. *It doesn't matter that I'm scared. This is something much worse.*

"I may have to fight Vanitas after all. If I do, guys..."

He was afraid to voice the rest. What if it actually came to that? What exactly would happen next? Ven let out a big breath, his gaze still lowered.

I have to tell them. I have to make this request.

"I want you to—"

Terra cut him off.

"The three of us can never be torn apart, all right? I'll always find a way."

Ven felt Terra's hand squeeze his shoulder. Aqua bent over and

looked into his face with concern, then brushed his face with her fingertips.

They had it wrong. That wasn't it.

Ven placed his hand on Aqua's and gently lowered it, then brushed Terra's off his shoulder.

His eyes bored into them.

"I'm asking you, as a friend...Just...put an end to me."

Aqua stood back up, visibly saddened, while Terra continued to stare at him.

At that very moment, an unusually strong gust blew against the three of them.

And within the resulting cloud of dust were none other than Master Xehanort and Vanitas.

This is so stupid.

I'm already complete enough.

My power—my hatred—is so full, I'm ready to burst. I know everything about Ventus's heart. If he's pathetically begging for his friends to "put an end to him," he's probably full of light.

The light of friendship.

Something Vanitas would never possess no matter how badly he craved it—that light.

He stood at Xehanort's side, staring at Ventus from behind his mask.

"Behold. These lifeless keys used to be full of power—united with the hearts of their masters. On this barren soil, Keyblades of light and darkness were locked in combat...as a great Keyblade War raged," Xehanort declared in a solemn tone.

Terra, Aqua, and Ven were all focused on them.

Vanitas didn't care about any of it. All he wanted was to escape this abyss.

"Countless Keyblade wielders gave up their lives, all in search of one ultimate key. And it will soon belong to me...the χ-Blade."

Xehanort pointed at Ventus, signaling the start of their battle. Ventus and the other two donned their armor all at once.

Time for the big finale.

I'll go back to myself, I'll be free from this loathing, and I'll be one with the world itself.

Ventus almost charged, only for Terra to stop him and rush ahead himself.

Next to Vanitas, Xehanort, wearing an eerie smile, raised a hand. The earth split and gradually rose to block off Terra's path.

The earth slammed into him and sent him tumbling, and he ended

up on his knees. As if to further hinder Terra in his assault, another piece of terrain carried Xehanort and Vanitas skyward and became a lofty cliff towering over him.

Xehanort swung his arm once, and the once ownerless Keyblades floated into the air to form a swarm, as if he was the one to whom they owed allegiance.

Vanitas leaped down from the cliff and hopped on top of one of the Keyblades, heading straight toward Ventus.

The horde of Keyblades under Vanitas streaked toward Ven.

“Ven!”

Though Aqua rushed his way, Ven was sent crashing to the ground, unable to dodge the Keyblades whipping toward him like a tornado.

Like some creature acting with a will of its own, the swarm crept up the cliff with Vanitas still aboard.

Terra was at the top, under attack from countless Keyblades himself.

Aqua hurried to her friend where he was being driven back—and left herself open to a fresh group of Keyblades surging at her like animals.

She met the ground hard, and her helmet broke.

“Aqua!” Ven came running up.

She didn’t have time to worry about that, though, as she cast Protect from her Keyblade to shield Terra from the assault.

“Terra!” She made it just in the nick of time.

Her spell wrapped around Terra’s body, and those Keyblades that struck the barrier were knocked aside and went still.

The sky hung heavy with dark clouds, and everything shook in the ominous roar of the wind.

Ven sprinted to Terra, who fell to the earth as the Protect spell wore off. Aqua knew she had to act, too, but she wasn’t going to be rising anytime soon after her own crash landing.

Terra—Ven.

She could see the two of them pursuing their foes up the precipice.

Face-to-face with Terra, Xehanort summoned his Keyblade, but Ven swung down toward the Master with his own blade from behind.

Did he just vanish...?

Xehanort was nowhere to be found in the arc of his Keyblade.

Then it was Xehanort who was behind Ven, as if he had teleported. By the time Ven noticed, the man had seized his helmet with one hand.

Ven dangled in the air.

Xehanort's strength and speed were overwhelmingly superior, and he had the boy completely immobilized.

What do I do? What can I do?

"Ven!" Terra cried out as he stood up.

At that very instant, though, the swarm of Keyblades came swooping back with Vanitas aboard and mercilessly knocked Terra off the cliff.

Ven was still unable to move, his helmet caught in Xehanort's clutches.

"Ven!"

That's Aqua's voice, he thought, and that instant Xehanort's hand sent a stupendous shock coursing through him. A chill—a stinging pain. His entire body froze solid all at once. Ven couldn't really tell what happened. Then Xehanort let go, and he fell—dropped like a stone. His body was going to shatter. But just as he accepted his fate, Aqua caught him.

Anxious, she looked up to the top of the cliff—toward Xehanort and Vanitas.

A black mass floated from the palm of Xehanort's hand. It rose up and up, into the clouds, and there appeared an enormous, pale-blue light.

The radiant, heart-shaped moon—Kingdom Hearts.

Terra crashed into the ground. Breathing raggedly, he ripped off his helmet.

I'm just too weak.

He didn't think he stood a chance against Xehanort. But he still had to try.

I can't lose; failure isn't an option. The more the thought grew, the greater the stygian force welling up within his body.

Do I really want this? Am I not just relying on the power of darkness again?

Like when I fought Master Eraqus?

He didn't have time to worry about that. Right now, he needed strength—and nothing else.

When Terra directed his gaze skyward, he saw a pale, heart-shaped moon suspended in the heavens.

He hurled his Keyblade into the air and hopped aboard its glider

form, then rocketed toward the top of the bluff where Xehanort waited before the great moon.

When he landed and immediately removed his armor, Terra was greeted by both the Master and Vanitas.

“Admirably done. I knew this was a journey you could make—over the unseen wall that divides darkness and light. And I was not wrong, Terra!”

You won't deceive me again.

“My friend, Ven—”

“Just...put an end to me.”

Why had Ven said such a thing? What exactly was the χ -Blade? Whatever it was, Xehanort had to be the one behind it.

“—you tell me, Xehanort—what did you do to him?”

Terra held out his right hand and called his Keyblade to it.

Xehanort broke into a grin of amusement at this, then replied, “Why, I did him a favor and freed the darkness inside him. Alas, poor Ventus never had the fortitude for such strenuous trials.”

“Xehanort!”

Terra brandished his Keyblade, then charged at the Master. However, Vanitas intercepted him.

Vanitas's Keyblade met Terra's in a burst of sparks.

The boy's mask made it impossible to read his expression.

Just who was he? Knowing the circumstances of his birth only made him more unnerving.

When Terra tried to close the distance between them, Vanitas leaped nimbly to the rear, only to come rushing ahead all at once.

“Good, Terra...Let your anger rise,” said Xehanort as he observed the battle from the sidelines. Meanwhile, Vanitas was almost toying with Terra, repeatedly falling back only to approach again without attacking in any real consequential way.

It was infuriating.

Terra wasn't going to get anywhere like this. He turned away from Vanitas toward Xehanort.

“Ah—so I'm the one you want.”

“Yaaaaaah!!”

Letting out a roar, Terra struck downward with everything he had in him, but Xehanort effortlessly stopped the blow and smirked right in his face.

“Go, take what Ventus owes you. And take Aqua's life.”

Vanitas appeared to nod at those words, then hurried off in a flash, leaping down the precipice in a single bound. Terra made to go after him, but Xehanort cut him off.

“You see how powerless you are to save them? Savor that rage

and despair. Let it empower you!”

What good was the power of light if it couldn’t save his two friends?

It was meaningless.

He would be able to save them if he was strong enough.

If so...If that's how it is...

“You will pay, Xehanort! Was my Master—no, my father, Eraqus not enough for you? Leave my friends alone!”

Terra felt strength surging within him. *More, I need more. If I want to beat Xehanort, I need something beyond what I have.*

“Yes, boy, that’s it! More! Let your whole heart blacken with anger!”

Terra didn’t care that the power thrumming through him belonged to the darkness.

As long as it made him strong.

“Rrraaaah!!”

A pitch-black aura arose from his entire body toward the heavens.

Ven was terribly cold in Aqua’s arms. But she could see that at least there was life in his eyes.

“Ven, are you okay?”

His body was so thoroughly covered in ice that he couldn’t even answer her question. Maybe a healing spell would fix him up a bit...

Just then a lone figure approached Aqua.

“How ’bout you leave the Popsicle with me, so you can go have your little fight with Terra. You can’t be too happy about him deep-sixing your Master,” the man said, eyeing the eerie moon hanging in the sky.

“Who are you...?”

He had a large scar on his left cheek, and a black patch over his right eye. His remaining eye was the same gold as Master Xehanort’s. “You think you two have got some grand role to play. As if. You’re only here so that when I finish you off, Terra will succumb to the darkness. So...who wants to go first?” the man—Braig—said with a thin smile.

“Shut up!” Only able to move his head, Ven shouted at Braig and glared.

“Oh, so this kiddo thinks he’s a full-fledged Keyblade wielder? He’s got the angry look down.”

Aqua was equally annoyed—everything about the man, from his mannerisms to his tone, rubbed her the wrong way. His condescending demeanor was utterly revolting.

With Ven still in her arms, she joined him in glaring daggers at

the man.

“Go ahead, if you wanna waste your time. Keep trying to drive us apart with your mind games. It’ll never work!”

Laying Ven down on the ground, Aqua then readied her Keyblade.

“Terra will prove to you he’s stronger!” she declared, then fired a spell directly at the man.

“Ha-ha! Not bad, missy, but it’ll take more than that to get rid of me!”

The man fired the bowguns—called Arrowguns—in his hands, but his attacks weren’t that fierce.

Aqua easily knocked the projectiles aside, then cast another spell. If her opponent preferred to attack from a distance, then she’d stick to a ranged offensive as well. No sooner had she settled upon this strategy than Braig began a mad dash toward her, firing another salvo as he collided with her. Aqua deftly avoided the shots as she had earlier, then moved back and observed him.

Something—wasn’t right here. She couldn’t quite put her finger on what. *Is he...?*

Panting, the man sneered from a ways off. “I keep forgetting—don’t mess with Keyblade wielders. But you know what? That just means I made the right choice!”

“What?”

“Well...he wanted me to buy time, and I’d say he got it,” he replied.

Aqua dashed toward Braig, but her foe quickly turned his back on her and ran away.

Buy time? What did that mean?

She turned uneasily toward her fallen friend.

He was still where she had set him down moments ago. *It’s okay—he’s right there. So what about Terra...?*

“Aqua!”

Ven’s shout reached Aqua at the exact moment she lost consciousness.

Ven had called out as soon as he spotted Vanitas suddenly dropping down from the precipice, but it was too late.

Vanitas brought his Keyblade right down on top of her head, and Ven witnessed her body collapse slowly to the earth.

Try as he might, he couldn’t move.

Ven had been immobile during her entire battle with the other man, too.

Vanitas raised his Keyblade over Aqua, poised to plunge it into her chest.

Even then, Ven couldn't act. *But I have to save her...!*

"No!"

With a scream, Ven finally exerted all his strength to break free of the icy shell around his body.

"Finally opened your eyes?" Vanitas asked. "What happened to not fighting me?"

His Keyblade hovered over Aqua's chest.

"Shut up!"

"What a beautiful friendship."

This time, Vanitas jabbed his Keyblade at Ven.

The χ -Blade might be born if he fought Vanitas here. The thought terrified him. But if he didn't do something, Aqua was done for. *If this is what it comes to, then I should be the one to go.*

And there was the matter of his request from earlier.

"Just...put an end to me."

If I do become the χ -Blade, I know Terra or Aqua will follow through. So I can't let Aqua's life end here.

"Let's do this."

"Show me what you've got!"

Ven's and Vanitas's Keyblades came together.

Ventus—you've certainly come back stronger from your journey, haven't you? Or maybe I should call you Ven now?

Vanitas smirked slightly underneath his mask as he scanned Ven's face.

He could sense Ven's heart each time their Keyblades met.

It made him kinda happy—why was that? After all, he despised Ven's open heart.

Whereas Ven's worries and suffering were proof of his growth, his proclivity toward the light, Vanitas's own misery was merely a pitch-black morass that brought with it nothing but pain.

We're so different, but I could feel you every step of the way. I bet you didn't notice me at all.

What does this battle between us mean to you?

You probably don't have a clue that it means our hearts are intertwining. The fight itself doesn't matter. What's important is that our struggle makes us feel the same things.

You hate me for trying to hurt your friend now, right?

And I hate you right back for having friends at all.

"This ends now!" Ventus shouted as he hammered Vanitas with a devastating strike.

Vanitas's knees hit the dirt, and he felt his mask coming off. *Never thought I'd end up showing you my face. Why do we look different, anyhow?*

With that, Vanitas began to laugh.

"You've done it, Ventus. Now that my body is about to perish, you and I will have to join together!"

Finally, I'll be free of this pain.

"The χ-Blade will be forged!"

Pure darkness spread from Vanitas's body, and from within it spilled out Unversed that clung to Ventus.

"The Unversed...come from you?" Ven shouted as they held him still.

"It happened when you and I were split into two. The negativity took shape as these monsters. They are what I feel—a horde of fledgling emotions under my control."

Hate, sadness, fear, jealousy, panic, suffering, envy, anxiety, pain, despair.

I embrace them all.

Y'know, I may not have friends the way Ventus does, but I forgot about all of you. You were always with me, from the moment I was born.

"I released them in all the worlds I could, hoping to lure you away from home and isolate you from your Master. We needed to make you stronger. The Unversed were the perfect opponents. And better yet, no matter how many times you defeat them, their negativity flows right back into me."

Now, come back to me.

Let us become the very world itself.

The Unversed transformed into an ebony stream that poured into Vanitas.

"You never stood a chance against us, Ventus."

Vanitas sauntered toward the boy and touched his cheek. The moment he did, a dreadful wind and brilliant luminescence engulfed their bodies.

"Welcome back, Vanitas—and Ventus."

"I'm home, Ventus—and Vanitas."

"We will never be apart again."

Then, as their forms became one, light shot toward the heavens.

Splendid.

Xehanort chuckled as he parried Terra's strikes, and each one made him more sure. This was his true goal; long had he had awaited this fateful day.

The power concealed within that young flesh—*that* was what he sought.

There was no value or purpose left in this aged body.

What meaning was there in flesh? It was the heart that had the final word in all things. The heart was the very reason the body existed at all. What's more, Keyblade Masters such as he were capable of setting the heart free.

And what significance did this hold—if not life everlasting? If he released his heart and housed it within the body of another, it could potentially live on forever.

This body was nearing its end.

When it perished, Terra's heart would be completely stained in darkness. That would be the moment when Xehanort released his own heart.

Terra's blow struck home.

The pain rapidly sapped him of his stamina. *Yes, you have the potential to be stronger still. But when such a time comes, that strength will no longer be yours.*

Xehanort's knees hit the earth. At nearly the same time, the world rumbled, and an enormous pillar of light shot up toward Kingdom Hearts.

What was joy if not this?

Xehanort was out of breath, but a beaming smile appeared on his face as he pointed out the radiance.

"There, you see?"

Terra turned slowly at those words. That light could indicate only one thing.

"The χ-Blade has been forged!" shouted Xehanort. The χ-Blade, born of the union of a heart of light and another of darkness, was here with Kingdom Hearts.

The weapon would open the door to another world, consummating the balance between light and dark, and making known the secret of the world—its will and its heart.

"Ven!" Terra yelled as he stared at the light. But Xehanort stood up without a moment's pause and turned his Keyblade on his own chest.

"And now, Terra, it is time for the final union!"

"What?"

His Keyblade granted the pain of hope. Xehanort's heart would at last be released from this decrepit frame.

"At last, our moment is here."

The Keyblade piercing Xehanort's chest turned to light and rose into the air. He was unsure if the conscious "him" at that moment was the light itself or some vestige left in his body.

Regardless, a dreadful euphoria seized his entire body—no, he had already discarded that. In that case, perhaps calling it a world would not be too much. A world filled with joy, ruled by him.

"Out with the old and brittle vessel, and in with a younger, stronger new one! I swore I would survive...and be there to see what awaited beyond the Keyblade War! And now it is your darkness that shall be the ark that sustains me!"

Xehanort could see his body as it met its end. *I was right—I've left my physical form behind. Together with my Keyblade, I've become an extraordinary being of heart alone.*

All that remained was to seek out his new vessel.

Terra immediately encased his body in armor. It was nothing more than a toy, though. With the influence of darkness on Terra's heart, Xehanort already had the opening he needed to slip in. Once Terra's heart was driven out, all that awaited it was a return to the abyss.

Now, for my new fleshly form.

Before Xehanort's body, dissolving into light, the armor that had covered Terra's body fell off. His Keyblade also tumbled to the ground. Its owner was gone.

The hair of the Terra who emerged from the armor was silver, and his mouth was twisted in a grin.

Xehanort adjusted to the feel of his new body, fighting down the urge to burst out in laughter all the while. This brimming strength—this youth. This was what he had sought.

And thus, Terra's heart belonged again to darkness. *All worlds begin in darkness, and all so end. The heart is no different. Darkness sprouts within it—it grows, consumes it. Such is its nature. In the end, every heart returns to the darkness whence it came.*

In the sky hung a heart-shaped luminescence, Kingdom Hearts. And the eyes looking up at it were colored gold.

Now, it was time to witness the end—no, the beginning of the world—together with the χ-Blade.

As Xehanort, now Terra-Xehanort, took his first steps forward, metaphysical chains—chains born of pure will—shot out to form a prison around him.

"What?!"

He had seen chains like these before. They were the wards around that other world, the Land of Departure.

Did you...? Back then, could you have...?

Looking back, Terra-Xehanort saw that the fallen pieces of the

armor had come back together, watching him from where they knelt.

“Your body submits, your heart succumbs—so why does your mind resist?”

The armor housing Terra’s will stood slowly and readied its Keyblade.

“I’m asking you, as a friend...Just...put an end to me.”

I promised Ven—but I’ll do everything in my power to make sure I never have to honor it. I can’t bear the thought of losing him...

Aqua regained consciousness on that ancient battleground—the badlands.

“Gosh, I’m glad you’re awake.”

The one peering at her was her petite friend Mickey. When did he get here? And what happened? She fought that man, and then...

“Ven!”

What had become of Ven?

Aqua sat up in a panic and scanned her surroundings. Spotting him standing a short distance away, she ran over to him.

“Oh, thank goodness. Ven! You’re safe!”

No sign of any wounds, so he must have made it through in one piece. But he didn’t answer her. She was worried; he was acting like he had when they first met. Aqua looked him in the face and called his name once more.

“Ven?”

The instant she did, Ven slowly raised his head. His eyes were gold. *Ven, is it not...you?*

“Look out!” Mickey just barely defended her from the sudden thrust of Ven’s Keyblade. “That’s not Ven!” Mickey shouted, then drew his Keyblade on Ven. The weapon the boy held looked odd, almost like two Keyblades bound together.

Could that Keyblade be—the χ -Blade?

“Correct. I am not Ventus. His heart has become a part of mine now.”

A dark miasma arose from Ven’s body and transformed the armor he wore into the armor of the masked boy.

But...No...

“This χ -Blade will open a door—one that leads to all worlds! Then, Keyblade-bearing warriors will flock here from each and every one of them, to battle for the light within Kingdom Hearts! And just like the legend says, the Keyblade War will begin!” Ven—or Ventus-Vanitas—cried toward the heart-shaped light in the sky. But Aqua raised her Keyblade, cutting him off.

“Shut up! I’m sick of your nonsense. Give Ven his heart back!”

There had to be a way to reclaim Ven’s heart without losing him.

“Yeah, we’re taking back Ven’s heart!” Mickey shouted, and the two charged in unison. However, Ventus-Vanitas grinned confidently, then hopped backward and vanished. “What?”

Just moments later, Ventus-Vanitas reappeared behind Mickey and sliced with the χ -Blade. Though Mickey narrowly managed to stop the blow, the sheer force drove him to his knees.

His strength was on another level compared to the masked boy Vanitas they had fought in the past, but losing still wasn’t an option. Not to mention she had a comrade in arms this time.

Aqua fired off magic to protect Mickey, but Ventus-Vanitas dodged and stabbed the χ -Blade into the earth.

“Watch out!”

Aqua ran to Mickey, at the same moment that a cross of energy and light fired from the χ -Blade.

“No! Now’s our chance, Aqua!”

With a mighty leap, Mickey released a pearly shot from his Keyblade. Aqua jumped at the same time and cast a spell from behind him. The power of Mickey’s holy light momentarily staggered Ventus-Vanitas.

Aqua and Mickey kept on him, eager to press the attack. Still, Ventus-Vanitas swatted away their Keyblades, wearing an easy grin the entire while.

The momentum of his parries created storm-like gusts that flung Aqua and Mickey against the cliffside.

“What’s wrong? Giving up already?”

Aqua couldn’t see a trace of Ven in the overwhelmingly sinister expression of the boy sneering down at her.

Out of breath, Aqua pulled the Wayfinder from her pocket and held it tightly.

“Terra, Ven, lend me strength.”

It would be her final wish...

Just then, a glow appeared in the Wayfinder, and Aqua’s Keyblade was filled with a clear gleam.

She got to her feet, then charged at Ventus-Vanitas, prepared to give her life in battle.

Her Keyblade and Ventus-Vanitas’s χ -Blade clashed in a tremendous shock wave.

“You’re just wasting your energy!”

I won’t lose—I can’t lose. Not with Terra and Ven on my side.

Where the χ -Blade met her shining Keyblade, its wicked gleam faded.

“What?!”

Ventus-Vanitas let out a shocked gasp, just before Aqua sent him flying. The χ -Blade left his hand and hovered in the air. A multitude of blazing beams poured out from the χ -Blade between Ventus-Vanitas, who was bowled over by the impact, and Aqua, who stood with her Keyblade at the ready.

Almost as if the χ -Blade had a mind of its own, the light sent rumbling shock waves through the terrain, creating many keyholes in its brilliant wake.

“Oh no! It’s...it’s gone all haywire!” Aqua heard Mickey cry from a distance.

Ventus-Vanitas’s armor became Ven’s again.

“Ven!”

The χ -Blade shattered, and the gleaming torrent swelled. Ven’s body was swept away by what had now become a storm of light and turbid streams of darkness. Aqua ran after him. She reached out. She wasn’t close enough. *Just a little farther...*

Got him!

But the swirl of light swallowed up her, Ven, and then Mickey as well.

The blinding brilliance—a world illuminated by its glow.

And in its shadow—darkness.

I’m fighting.

With who?

With myself—my own darkness.

Where am I?

Who am I?

I have to keep them safe.

I’m protecting them—both of them.

We’re one.

My body belongs to Xehanort now, but I can still feel my connection to them.

I won’t fade away.

I’ll protect them—and the world.

Collapsed before Terra’s very eyes was...himself.

My body lying on the ground, but my hair is silver. He fell by my hand—but who am I?

The armor dropped to its knees.

A terrific light was swelling toward it from the rampaging χ -Blade, and it swallowed up Terra’s form.

All that remained in the Keyblade Graveyard were glowing particles and an empty suit of armor—and Kingdom Hearts shining over all.

The motes of light appeared to be both pouring out from Kingdom Hearts and being drawn up into it. Clouds gradually concealed the great moon, leaving silence and gloom blanketing the area.

Aqua, Ven—one day, I swear, I'll...

Where am I?

Ven landed in an unfamiliar world—no, this had to be the inside of his heart. If he was here, then where was *he*—Vanitas...?

He turned around to find Vanitas standing there. In his hand was the χ -Blade. However, its gleam was dull. What had happened?

“Just...put an end to me.”

Did someone—maybe Aqua or Terra—do what I asked? Or maybe...?

“Our union was not finished. The χ -Blade shouldn’t stay broken like this.” Vanitas jabbed the legendary weapon at him. “Join me now, and we can complete the χ -Blade!”

Not on Ven’s watch.

He shook his head quietly, his own Keyblade in hand. “I’ve got a better idea. How ’bout I destroy you both?”

Vanitas burst out laughing. “The χ -Blade is made of your heart, too, idiot. If you destroy it, your heart will vanish forever.”

“Whatever it takes. Anything to save Terra and Aqua.”

As long as his two best friends were safe, Ven wouldn’t mind being lost.

“Hmph. It’s always about your friends, isn’t it?” Vanitas spat with annoyance.

“At least I have some! I’ve become a part of their hearts, just as they’ve become a part of mine. My friends are my power...and I’m theirs!” Ven cried with conviction, then leaped.

He felt them—Terra’s and Aqua’s hearts.

And the hearts of the many friends he had made on other worlds, too.

I’ve become strong, but that strength isn’t mine alone. It belongs to everyone.

That’s why he won’t beat me.

Ven moved toward Vanitas. Keyblade met χ -Blade. Though the χ -Blade had been forged by the collision of their hearts, it would never fully come into being if one of them were to die.

Ven had no idea what would transpire if the χ -Blade entered the world. Just that he couldn’t let it happen.

“Urgh!”

Vanitas dropped to his knees. In that instant, the world—his heart

that had barely managed to stay together—shattered.

But I'm still me.

And I'm not about to lose to the likes of you.

The darkness in your heart will not overtake me.

The twinkling lights were shards of his heart. *Now, finally, our hearts are linked.*

Pain crackled through his body.

Vanitas rose into the air, shooting a hateful gaze at Ventus as the boy glared back at him.

When you become part of me, I'll be free of this agony. And I'll be the one in control, not you. I don't care about the balance of light and darkness in our hearts—at the end of the day, it's gonna be me or it's gonna be you.

The χ -Blade clashed with the Keyblade. Vanitas could tell the χ -Blade was on the verge of shattering at any moment. Even so, he wasn't going to lose to him.

Your friends are your power? Get real. I'm not about to let you win. I don't want you to win.

I'm plenty strong on my own, so I don't need to go crying to others for help.

Their two powers grappled and crashed together. As they did, their strengths became more complete—or was it their hearts? And with each clash between their hearts, the power grew.

Whose power is this? Mine? Ventus's?

It hurts. Why does it hurt so badly? Wasn't this supposed to end the pain?

Ventus's Keyblade knocked away the χ -Blade. Though Vanitas grabbed at it, he couldn't reach. *The χ -Blade's drifting away.*

He went limp.

The χ -Blade turned to light and shattered. Then Ventus's Keyblade did the same.

Will I disappear? If I do, will my pain and torment be over? Will it end even if I haven't become the χ -Blade?

Ventus regarded him quietly.

My hatred of you was my power.

Ven...I'm jealous of you.

I'll be gone soon. Will you fade away, too? Or maybe—?

And light gently enfolded his body.

Light arose from the spot where Vanitas had disappeared. It flared,

then blanketed Ven's body as well.

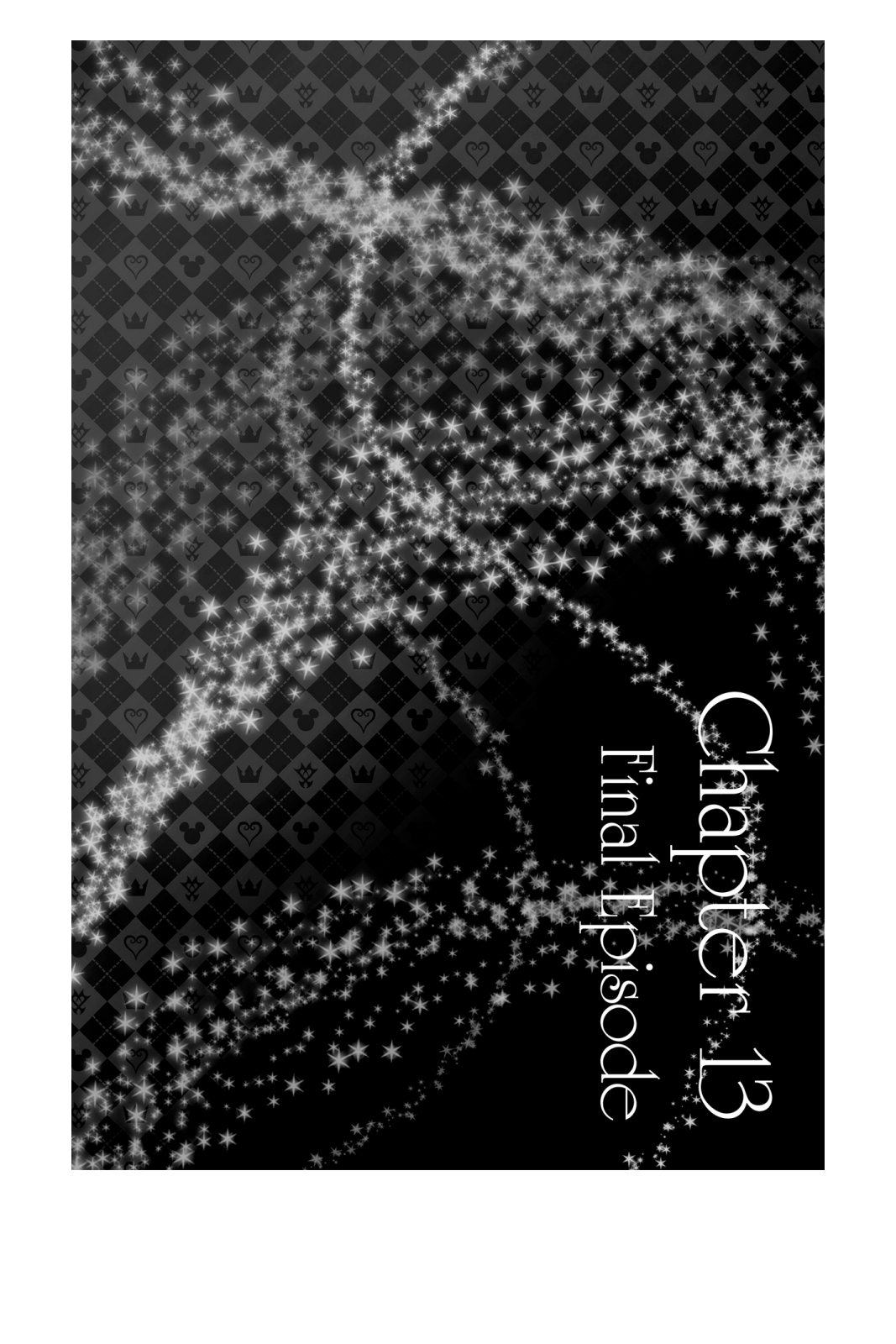
It was soft and tender.

Radiant and whole.

Is it over...?

Wrapped in this strong, benevolent light, Ven descended into the darkness. *I know this place—it's so familiar.*

This...is your heart.



Chapter 13

Final Episode

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Final Episode

SHE CAME TO IN A ROOM SHE'D SEEN BEFORE.

Where am I?

"Aqua, you lost consciousness. Fortunately, Mickey found you and Ventus drifting in the Lanes Between and brought you back to me to receive proper care."

The one speaking to her was Yen Sid. *Oh, I'm in the Mysterious Tower...* When she looked around her, Aqua saw Ven asleep against a wall, and Mickey beside him. Donald and Goofy were there, too. Only one person was missing.

Yen Sid apparently had surmised what she was thinking and said, "I am sorry, but there was no sign of Terra."

"I see," Aqua replied, her gaze falling. She then slowly approached the unconscious Ven and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Ven! Ventus!"

She shook him. He was warm. And yet...

"The boy's heart is sleeping," Yen Sid gravely pronounced.

"When will he wake?" Aqua asked, looking up at the sorcerer.

"I could not say. It is almost as if his heart has left. Should it return, he may very well wake. Should it not, then he may sleep like this for all eternity."

"No..."

But—if there was still some hope...

"I'll keep him safe—until he wakes. Forever if I have to."

As Aqua gave Ven another long look, Yen Sid spoke to her.

"I will tell you what your friend needs right now. It is not your protection. He needs you to believe. You see, Ventus's heart hangs in the balance. It sleeps in the place between light and darkness. From all I can perceive, that means he will be looking for a friend—one who believes in him, to show him the way home."

Yen Sid moved away from the others and took his customary seat.

"Just as long as you love him...then Ventus will be able to find you when he wakes. He can follow that love back to where he belongs—the realm of light."

Still seated, the sorcerer turned back toward Aqua and smiled. It brought a smile to Aqua's and Mickey's faces as well.

There was still hope. Their bond would never be broken, as long as she believed.

Mickey also turned to Aqua and said, "Don't you worry, Aqua. I believe in Ven, too. Gosh, he's been as good a friend to me as anybody. And if both you and me believe in him with all our hearts, then he'll have two lights to follow instead of one."

"Three lights. Terra," Aqua softly corrected.

Mickey's expression grew a bit saddened. "But...Terra's gone. Maybe for good."

Aqua shook her head quietly.

"No. I think I know how to find him."

She pulled the Wayfinder from her pocket and held it tightly.

They would never be apart no matter where they were.

Because we're connected.

"I have to go," Aqua said as she gently considered the slumbering Ven.

"Go where?" Mickey asked with concern.

"Somewhere Ven can sleep safely. Then I'll go looking for Terra."

"You should come to our world!" suggested Donald. But she gave a quiet shake of her head.

"I'd hate to bring you trouble."

"But...!"

Aqua smiled back at Goofy.

"You are wasting your breath, Donald, Goofy," Yen Sid chided the two of them.

Nodding at the sorcerer, Aqua picked up Ven and carefully put him on her back.

"Aqua, never forget, we'll always be friends."

"Of course not. Thanks, Mickey."

With a small bow to Yen Sid, she exited the room.

"I'm so worried...", Goofy said with a sigh.

"It is all as it was guided...", Yen Sid murmured, then gazed out the window at the twinkling stars in the sky.

Aqua left the Mysterious Tower and looked up into space.

She didn't have a particular destination in mind, but she couldn't stay here. Aqua didn't know if Xehanort and the masked boy Vanitas were truly gone, or if Terra was all right. Either way, she needed to get the sleeping Ven to someplace safe, then set out once more in search of Terra.

At that moment, Ven stirred on her back.

“Ven...?”

She couldn't sense any life from him, yet he gradually raised his right hand and reached out with it.

And into it flashed a Keyblade.

The light from it formed a keyhole in the air.

What could this be?

The keyhole flared bright, then transformed into a gleaming door.

“All right...” Aqua nodded and smiled. Ven was showing her the way. “If that's where you want to go.”

Aqua slowly approached the door of light, one step at a time.

She passed through it—and gasped.

In the world on the other side—nighttime had fallen. The earth was cracked, and the place was gloomy and dark, but it was familiar.

Yes, it was the Land of Departure. Her former training grounds. Aqua surveyed the utter transformation, then spied a now-ownerless Keyblade lying on the ground.

It was the one Master Eraqus had wielded with love and respect.

“Of course. I would never let that happen.”

“I promise you I will bring Terra back...Only this time, you'll see that he has what it takes to be a Master.”

Taking the Keyblade in hand, Aqua remembered the promise she had made to Master Eraqus on the day she left.

Terra would never succumb to darkness. She knew he was out there fighting it somewhere. She could feel it.

“Aqua.”

At that moment, she heard a voice from somewhere. From deep within her memory, the explanation of the land's hidden secret that she had learned just before her journey began.

“Now that you are a Master, there is one secret in particular you must know. Should anything happen to me, and you find the legion of darkness at our doorstep...I ask that you take my Keyblade and use it to lock this land away. Generations of Keyblade Masters have been charged with keeping this land safe. Light and darkness exist in balance here, and there are those who would abuse such neutral ground. This is why our predecessors devised a certain...trick.”

Aqua hadn't remembered this at all until after Ven led her here. Maybe she had locked the information away within herself.

“Master...”

Gripping Master Eraqus's Keyblade firmly, Aqua started up the steps into the building.

Beyond the opened doors was the hall where they had conducted the Mark of Mastery exam.

There were three chairs in a row. Aqua carefully sat Ven in the center one, then moved around behind it.

Next, she raised Master Eraqus's Keyblade toward the back of the chair.

The light that extended from it connected to Ven's seat, where a keyhole then appeared.

Aqua then thrust the blade into the keyhole.

Radiance spilled out from it, radiance so bright it made her close her eyes. During the moment they were shut, the surrounding scenery changed completely.

The floor, the ceiling, the doors, the chairs, and everything else in the room took on a cold, inorganic quality, almost like marble. Running along its walls were several chains like those that once stretched through this world.

When Aqua stepped back in front of the chair, she found Ven still asleep there. She knelt beside it, then touched his cheek with her fingertips and spoke.

"I know it's a lonely place, but you'll be safe." She gave Ven a light pat on the head. "Terra and I will be back to wake you up before you know it."

The slumbering boy's face didn't even twitch.

Aqua knew the Master would keep Ven safe here.

She stood, then left the Chamber of Repose where Ven slept—or rather, the Chamber of Waking, where he would someday return to consciousness.

This was no longer the Land of Departure, but a land sealed tight...

After walking for a short while, Aqua turned around. The chamber where Ven slept was deep within the keep. Only she would be able to reach it now.

I promise I'll return with Terra.

Her lips pressed into a hard line, Aqua passed through the doors that led outside.

She gasped at how much the view had changed.

There was only a narrow path that stretched from the cliff where the castle sat. Would one wrong step mean a trip into that abyss?

And a thick darkness hung heavily over everything—the darkness between.

A look back at the castle showed her that it had transformed into a strange fortress almost cobbled together from smaller structures. Not

a trace of her former training grounds remained.

“Just use the key, and this land will be transformed. From that day forward, all who visit this land will be lost to oblivion, none ever able to solve the mystery. None, Aqua, except you.”

Aqua closed her eyes and made a fist over her chest as the Master’s words came back to her.

Please keep Ven safe, Master.

As Aqua walked away, putting the castle behind her, she heard a voice from somewhere.

“Aqua...put an end to me...”

It belonged to Terra.

Sensing that their bond still held strong, Aqua felt something warm go alight in her chest.

The darkness hadn’t taken Terra, she was sure.

He was making the same request as Ven had before. But Aqua wasn’t about to do that to either of her friends.

“Terra, tell me where to find you.” Aqua pulled out her Wayfinder charm, clasped it tightly, and tried to sense Terra.

His voice had come from Radiant Garden, the world where their hearts had gone their separate ways.

The world she landed on was dim. It would appear that dawn was about to break here—the sun was just below the horizon.

This was the plaza where she once fought the masked boy.

“Terra!” Almost immediately, she spotted a figure who resembled him.

Aqua ran to him happily, only to find that while this person was wearing Terra’s clothes, he had silver hair and a slightly different complexion.

“Terra?”

And when she looked searchingly into his eyes—they were gold.

Still, she could tell. Faint though its presence might have been, Aqua could feel Terra’s heart within him.

Terra reached out toward her, perhaps in response to her call.

But when she took a step back, his hand swiftly caught her by the collar.

He lifted her into the air. She couldn’t breathe. It was painful.

“Who...am I?” he asked.

What Aqua sensed next—was an immensely dark presence. Even

still...

“Such a terrible...darkness...Fight it, Terra—please!”

“Terra...you say?”

He froze when she called his name. He released his grip, and Aqua fell to the ground and coughed.

Terra sluggishly clutched his head, let out a groan, and covered his face with his hands.

“...Terra?”

When Aqua called out to him again, Terra stopped. He removed his hands from his face, and his demeanor shifted dramatically.

“Terra’s heart has been extinguished...smothered by the darkness within him!”

The Keyblade in Terra’s hand—the Keyblade of Master Xehanort—came swinging down, and Aqua sprang backward away from it.

She slowly raised her hand to summon her own Keyblade.

“My name is Master Aqua. Now return my friend’s heart or pay the price!” she firmly commanded.

He roared in answer.

In the moment that followed, he vanished in a shroud of darkness, only to reappear behind her and cleave at her with his Keyblade.

Aqua avoided the attack by whirling out of the way, then fixed Terra-Xehanort with a dead-on glare.

The Terra before her now was not the one she knew. Nevertheless, she could tell her friend was still in there.

Aqua didn’t know the specifics of what Master Xehanort had done to Terra, but she had a general idea. The old Master had stolen Terra’s body from him somehow. And if that’s how it was, then all she needed to do was drive Xehanort out.

Aqua took a deep breath to collect herself, then exhaled. “Come on, try me!” she challenged, and Terra-Xehanort closed the space between them in a flash.

He then fired an orb of purest black at her from point-blank range.

Aqua parried it with her Keyblade, then countered by swinging her Keyblade upward and casting a spell.

Though knocked back temporarily, Terra-Xehanort regained his balance, and a massive arm appeared from behind them.

It plunged into Aqua’s torso with tremendous force.

“Ngh!”

The pain was so acute Aqua could hardly breathe.

Where had that arm come from?

Her opponent didn’t give her time to wonder. This time, Terra-Xehanort raised his own hand overhead and called down a meteor toward Aqua.

She narrowly dodged it, only to find his next attack already

waiting for her.

His Keyblade grew to an enormous size, and she couldn't quite escape the glowing projectile that shot out of the end like a cannonball. It sent her flying.

Sticking her Keyblade into the ground to support herself as she almost fell, Aqua stood and directed a baleful gaze at Terra-Xehanort.

Lend me your strength—Ven, Terra.

Mustering her power, Aqua sprinted toward Terra-Xehanort and struck with her Keyblade.

She then used the opening it created to fire off a spell.

From the feel of the recoil, it had to be enough to knock him flat on his back.

Unfortunately...

Terra-Xehanort's body hung in midair.

He then righted himself and stood as if nothing had happened. Staring angrily into empty space, he let out a roar, and with it a terrible abyssal shock wave rippled across the plaza.

"I will guide you into the depths of darkness!"

The cry was utterly unlike Terra's voice. A beast as black as pitch appeared behind Terra-Xehanort.

"Terra—!"

What am I doing?

Who am I?

Who am I fighting?

Didn't I disappear?

Who is this person I'm seeing?

The one I'm fighting—is Aqua.

"Give Terra back!" Aqua cried, lashing out with her Keyblade. Some inky thing that wasn't him blocked her attack and knocked her away.

Who am I? My name is Terra.

Then who's the me fighting Aqua?

Xehanort took over my body...I thought. I'm under Xehanort's control now.

Which means Xehanort is using the body he stole from me to battle Aqua.

But I'm watching it play out, so where am I? Why am I here watching my body hurt her?

She's fighting with everything she has. For who?

For me.

What am I doing?

I have to fight—I have to fight, too.

I have to save my friend, too.

Just at that moment, radiance engulfed the area. Aqua had her Keyblade at the ready beside him.

“Terra...!”

“Aqua—!”

Their combined power—became a single heart of light that shot into the monster behind Terra-Xehanort. The creature moaned and roared.

I’m not totally his yet. I can still fight it—for my friends.

She had seen Terra for a second in that realm bathed in light.

Terra, with dark hair and blue eyes, not the Terra-Xehanort before her with hair of silver and irises of gold and a monster hovering behind him.

Aqua could sense Terra was right there with her. He was fighting alongside her—she knew it.

She dropped to a knee and regarded Terra-Xehanort. The beast that had been at his back just moments ago had vanished, and the shroud of darkness around his body was shrinking.

“Stop fighting back...!” Terra-Xehanort said in a strained voice, then went still. Aqua was positive the one restraining him—was Terra.

“Terra, I know you’re in there!”

Terra-Xehanort laboriously raised the Keyblade he held, struggling with his own body. “This’ll teach you...Get out of my heart!” He drove the Keyblade into his own chest.

“Terra!”

As she cried his name, the Keyblade that had pierced Terra fell to the ground. Now free, the monster that had been behind Terra-Xehanort the whole time emerged from him. Aqua couldn’t tell whose heart it was, or if it was a heart at all. Either way, she wanted to believe it wasn’t Terra’s.

Terra’s body remained in a heap on the ground like a puppet that had lost its strings.

The creature transformed into pure darkness and melted away into the stone. And Terra’s body was drawn into the darkness along with it.

“Terra!”

Aqua dove into the abyss after him.

Inside was nothing but darkness of the blackest shade.

Aqua swiftly donned her armor to avoid its influence, then went

after Terra on her Keyblade glider.

“The darkness can’t have you!”

She pursued Terra through the seemingly endless depths, then seized his hand. Pulling him into her arms, she made to return to the surface, but the light was so far away.

And the force dragging her down into the darkness was strong.

If I don’t do something, we’ll both be lost.

Aqua removed her armor, then leaned Terra against its empty shell.

A pit of darkness would try to claim the living, but its voracious power should be weaker on inanimate objects.

It was possible that between the two, it would be Aqua who felt the pull of darkness more now that she had given up on returning to the realm of light.

Her heart was still full of hope, though. After all, she would be able to save Terra.

Aqua placed her Keyblade in his hand.

“I’m with you.”

She wanted to leave their ties to each other as strong as she could. If she did, someday those connections would help them all to see each other again.

Aqua then gave the order to her armor.

“Go!”

Thus commanded, the armor immediately ascended to the light.

The last of her strength was spent, and the darkness pulled her body in.

It was even swallowing her willpower, or so it felt.

But she hadn’t given up.

Ven, I’m sorry. I might not make it back as soon as I thought. But I promise I’ll be there, one day, to wake you up.

Aqua’s body descended and became a tiny glimmer of light in the darkness. There was no one there to see it.

And then, a star fell.

Shooting stars weren’t rare. You could see them every night. But for whatever reason, this one felt just the slightest bit strange.

The two people Riku had met recently popped into his mind.

Maybe they were somewhere out there in the sky—the guy and the lady from another world.

And the one who left the island to travel the world so long ago.

Another star fell. He’d be in big trouble if he didn’t get home soon.

He looked at the small island across the water. He could hear the

waves.

“Hey, I’m gonna head back.” Riku got up from the sand and spoke to Sora, who was lying on the beach beside him.

“Yeah. Me, too,” Sora replied, clambering to his feet as well. When the two of them put the sea behind them and began strolling up the beach side by side, Riku noticed something.

“Sora, what’s wrong?” He stopped in his tracks to ask his friend.

“Huh?”

“You’re...”

A tear traced a path down Sora’s cheek. This was the first time Riku had ever seen him cry.

Sora looked down and placed his hands over each other on his chest.

“That’s weird. It’s like something’s squeezing me inside.”

“Somebody up there must be sad.” Riku sounded very sure, but Sora was confused.

“Up where?”

“They say every world is connected by one great big sky. So maybe there’s somebody up there in all those worlds who’s really hurting, and they’re waiting for you to help them.”

The two of them stood beside each other as they lifted their gazes to the starry sky again. Someone up there was in pain, no doubt about it.

“Well, gee, do you think there’s something I could do?” Sora asked hopefully.

Riku pondered for a moment, then said, “Hmm...Maybe they just need you to open your heart and listen.”

“Hmm...I dunno, Riku, you say some pretty weird stuff sometimes, but I’ll try it.”

Sora looked up at the stars and closed his eyes.

Disney Town—now returned to its former lively self.

Even without Unversed or Captain Dark, the races were on once again today. At the head of the pack was Huey in a red propeller plane, but Dewey and Louie came along right after and zipped by him. They were neck and neck right up to the finish line—that is, until Huey hit the turbo on his engine. He zoomed past the other two and crossed the goal in first.

“Nice work!”

“I knew ya had it in ya!”

Chip and Dale bounced up and down. Beside them were Pluto, Horace Horsecollar, and Daisy.

A kindly smiling Queen Minnie joined them in giving a big round

of applause. A thought crossed her mind, a thought about the three who had visited this town and then set off on their journey again.

What are they up to now, I wonder?

The Enchanted Dominion—peaceful once more.

Maleficent was gazing up at the castle, clad in her ebon mantle.

As long as there was light, darkness would persist. Beside every brilliant spark would be a tiny shadow. Bring enough of them together, and they would create a darkness most profound.

Maleficent's mouth twisted into a smile.

Princess Aurora was likely awake and professing her love to Prince Phillip right about then. However, the darkness would eventually overtake them, too.

With a swirl of her cloak, she disappeared.

Within the castle, Princess Aurora and Prince Phillip danced to elegant music. The three fairies—Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather—watched them happily.

“Oh dear, that dress won't do at all.” Flora waved her wand, and Aurora's dress became a lovely rose color.

“Don't you dare!” Now it was Merryweather who gave a wave of her wand, and the princess's dress turned blue.

“Come now, don't you see there's a better color?” Then Fauna twirled her wand, making Aurora's dress green.

“Now it looks worse than the first one!”

“Oh, you!”

“What are you doing?!”

“There!”

With each wave of the fairies' wands, the hue of Princess Aurora's dress changed at a dizzying pace. The princess herself only smiled, brimming with happiness, and continued her dance with the prince.

The Castle of Dreams—indeed full of dreams come true.

Cinderella danced with her Prince Charming, and the overjoyed Grand Duke was moved to tears as he looked on.

“Good for you, Cinderella.”

Jaquar, who had snuck into the castle, sniffled as he watched them in much the same manner. Cinderella was together with her prince, all thanks to Ven and Aqua. What were the two of them up to right about now?

The Fairy Godmother appeared behind Jaquar as he mused.

“Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo!”

When she intoned the magic words, shimmering fireworks appeared above Cinderella and the prince.

“Cinderella never stopped believing in her dreams, and this is her reward.”

The light shone upon Cinderella’s beautiful smile in an especially enchanting way.

The Dwarf Woodlands—bustling with activity.

The seven dwarfs sang as they marched. There was Doc and Grumpy, then Happy, Sleepy, Bashful, Sneezy, and, trailing a bit behind the others, Dopey. Each one was holding something.

“All right, men, let’s go.”

At Doc’s call, the dwarfs all ran at once to Snow White and the prince ahead of them. But, as he always did, Dopey tripped.

“Watch where you’re goin’!” Grumpy barked angrily. Worried, Snow White extended a hand to help Dopey unsteadily to his feet—but this was all part of the usual routine.

The seven dwarfs gathered around Snow White and the prince, peering up at them expectantly.

“What’s gotten into you all?”

No sooner had she asked than each of the seven flung their hands into the air. The beautifully colored leaves they had collected fluttered around Snow White and her prince in celebration. Small birds twittered together in song.

“My, they’re ever so lovely! Thank you, everyone,” said Snow White, gently leaning into her prince.

Radiant Garden—full of light.

Dilan, the imposing guard, picked up a pair of suspicious young intruders and ejected them from the gate.

“Ow! Cut it out!” shouted Lea, the one with red hair.

“You should be grateful I only tossed you out,” Dilan stated, at which Aeus nodded silently behind him.

“—Let’s go, Lea,” the blue-haired boy, Isa, said quietly. He stood up and brushed the dust from his pants.

“What is with those guys?”

“I don’t want any more trouble,” Isa urged.

Lea also climbed to his feet, albeit with some resignation.

“There’ll always be another chance,” Isa reminded him softly as they walked away. Lea followed after.

“We were so close,” he complained as they reached the residential

area. Beside the small shop run by the Moogles, an unusual-looking elderly gent, Scrooge, was touting his wares with some blue ice cream in hand.

“Come one, come all, and have yourself a taste! Ice cream, ice cream, sweet, salty, and strange!”

“What’s that?” Lea ran up to check it out.

“Hullo, there, laddie. How about a cone?”

“I’m...guessing they aren’t free?” Lea asked, jamming a hand into his pocket.

Scrooge hopped up and yelled, “Of course not! Are ye daft?!”

“Okay, I’ll take one...no, two!”

“Thank ye kindly!”

Lea handed over some munny and took the two cones from Scrooge, one of which he gave to Isa.

“It’s cold...,” Isa muttered as he took a bite.

“What’re you talking about? It’s ice cream; of course it’s cold. Got it memorized?”

“Salty, too.”

“But sweet!” Lea added, and Isa smiled a bit. That was rare for him. Well, eating ice cream together, talking about silly stuff, laughing together—it was just what friends did.

Wonder what he’s doing now—Ven, was it?

“We’ll get another shot at it.”

“Yeah,” Isa replied, gazing at the castle they had failed to infiltrate. Lea grinned and looked up at it, too.

Olympus Coliseum—full of hope.

“I got two words for ya: train, train, train!”

As usual, Hercules was doing pushups before a pontificating Phil. The day when Hercules’s unfailing daily diligence would turn him into a true hero was near, he was sure.

“More! I said more, Herc!” Phil shouted again.

Zack was leisurely watching them, as he always did.

I need to get into shape, too—and become a hero.

Behind Zack, who had begun doing some absentminded squats, a gust of wind blew. He turned around, and a single black angel feather drifted down in front of him.

Zack picked it up from where it had landed softly. The wind then blew again.

Terra, Aqua, and then Ven. What were they all doing right about now...?

Deep Space—where friendship had begun to sprout.

A small spaceship sped through the expansive galaxy. Within the zero-gravity cockpit, a Wayfinder-shaped toy floated.

“Fren...,” Experiment 626 murmured, then hugged the toy with great care.

The ship flew off, carrying Experiment 626 into the far reaches of space.

Neverland—where dreams were nurtured.

The Lost Boys carried a treasure chest carefully. It was filled with everything they cherished.

In the sky above them soared Peter Pan and Tinker Bell, scattering light as they went.

“Wonder what they’re up to now,” Peter muttered. Ven and the others had suddenly popped into his head. Just then, Tinker Bell pointed to a spot a short ways away.

Hook and Smee had their heads together, discussing something. It was easy to tell they were up to no good.

“Okay, time for some fun.”

Peter quickly swooped down and snatched away Hook’s feathered hat.

“Wha—what?!”

In the sky, Peter Pan laughed as he plopped it on his head.

The Mysterious Tower—tranquil again.

Donald and Goofy both stood at attention with their hats removed. In front of them, Mickey stepped slowly and glumly toward the desk of Yen Sid.

Tension filled the room.

Yen Sid, his arms crossed and eyes closed, said nothing.

Mickey took the Star Shard from a pocket and set it on the desk. Next, he called his Keyblade to his hand and placed it there, too.

Head hanging, Mickey turned away from Yen Sid and began trudging away.

All was quiet...

...until the taciturn Yen Sid opened his eyes and rose to his feet. The sorcerer took the relinquished Keyblade.

Mickey observed Yen Sid.

The sorcerer held out the Keyblade to the king.

When Mickey stared at him in confusion, Yen Sid responded with a deep nod.

Smiling, Mickey accepted the Keyblade.

Donald and Goofy shared a happy glance.

Welcoming the start of another journey someday—Mickey once again raised his Keyblade aloft.

Back to Radiant Garden.

Kairi was picking flowers in a field by a fountain. She turned around, thinking she'd suddenly heard someone speak to her.

"Did—did someone call me?"

Kairi lifted her eyes. The skies of Radiant Garden were colored with the pale purple before a sunset.

Around her neck was the pendant Aqua had enchanted, full of the magic that would one day light her way.

And then...

What happened to me? I'm asleep. This is someone's heart. So warm and familiar.

"Hey...can you hear me?" the boy, Sora, asked Ven's small light that drifted down from the sky.

"I heard your voice. It cut through the darkness around me. All alone, I followed the sound, into a sea of light...and found myself here with you," Ven answered as he floated into the palm of Sora's small hand.

"Yeah."

Slightly relieved, Ven continued. "You gave me something back when I needed it most—a second chance."

"I did?" Sora said.

"Yeah—I remember now."

I borrowed your heart, and it brought me back to the realm of light. Our meeting was chance, but the connections between all the worlds turned it into fate.

"But...now I have to go back to sleep again."

I'll go to sleep, so I can awaken someday.

"Are you sad?"

Ven found Sora's question...difficult to answer.

Am I sad?

"Would you mind if I stayed here, with you?" he asked in response.

“Sure, if it’ll make you feel better,” Sora replied.

“Thanks.”

Enfolded in those small hands, Ven returned quietly to Sora’s heart.

One day, he would awaken.

The sky was full of stars.

As Sora opened his eyes, Riku asked, “Well?”

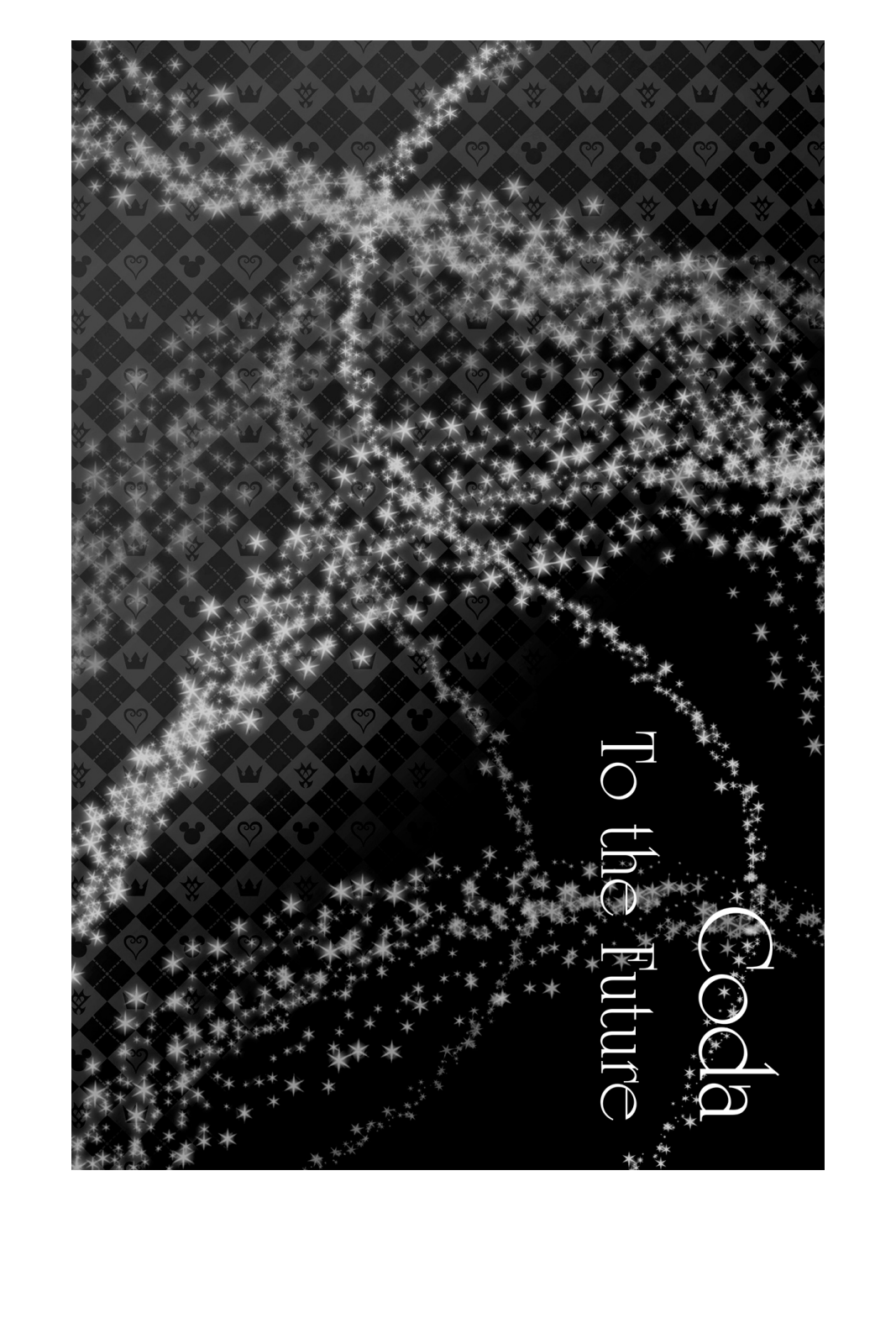
“Ya know, I think it worked,” Sora said with a smile.

“Oh, good,” Riku replied, then looked at the stars up above.

Thinking of you, wherever you are—

Sora also turned his attention to the night sky above him. Three stars were twinkling especially bright.

And beyond the same sea, standing on the same land, these two heroes who would one day save the world gazed at the same sky.



Coda To the Future

To the Future

MY EFFORTS THESE MANY YEARS HAVE COME TO FRUITION, with the world I govern having become a paradise worthy of being called “Radiant Garden.”

Nurtured by the pure water that is the source of life, fragrant flowers bloom in abundance, and the people face each day with hopeful smiles.

But where there is light, darkness also lurks. As noted in my earlier reports, I must solve the mystery of this “darkness of the heart.” This paradise depends on it.

I shall perform an experiment to probe the depths of a person’s heart. One of my own apprentices, Xehanort, has volunteered to be a subject.

The young man has served me ever since I nursed him back from death’s door some years ago.

He had lost all his memories at the time, but later showed remarkable intellectual curiosity and readily absorbed my teachings, gaining deep wisdom. Any mental immaturity is surely due to his young age.

An uncouth-looking man with a patch over one eye, Braig, entered the square with two men in tow. His uniform identified him as one of the guards of the castle in the world of Radiant Garden.

“Right this way.”

One of the men was a large, brawny fellow dressed in the same uniform—Dilan. The other was the ruler of this world, a man called Ansem the Wise.

Ansem the Wise had a well-groomed beard and was clad in a white robe.

In the center of the square, a young man lay fallen. This silver-haired youth was once known as Terra. Beside him, a woman’s suit of armor was scattered about, as if the pieces had been hastily removed.

Ansem helped the boy sit up in his arms and addressed him. “Young man, what ails you?”

The silver-haired youth groaned and opened his eyes slowly.

“Can you speak? Tell me your name,” said Ansem the Wise.

“Xeha...nort,” the lad muttered incoherently. Was that his name?

“Xehanort?” Ansem the Wise asked in return.

Braig was smirking off to one side, but no one noticed.

Then the young man named Xehanort fell unconscious again in Ansem’s arms.

“Quickly, get him to the castle!”

“You can count on me.”

Braig picked Xehanort up at Ansem the Wise’s order.

“Dilan, get those for me.”

Braig indicated the armor lying off the to the side with a glance, then returned to the castle with quick strides.

Terra stood within a darkness so thick not a single ray of light broke through.

Oddly enough, he wasn’t nervous. If he knew one thing for certain, it was that this was where he belonged.

“Darkness rules your heart—it gives me control. Muscle and sinew that once obeyed you now rebels against you. How you can remain here at all confounds the mind.”

It was Xehanort. The two of them faced each other in the inky gloom.

Softly, Terra answered Xehanort. “It’s still my heart. You think you can just come in and take over? I’m not gonna sit by and let that happen.”

But Xehanort merely scoffed. “Hmph. Don’t even entertain any notions of escaping me, boy. In the end, your heart will be engulfed by mine forever.”

Terra shook his head slowly and regarded Xehanort. “Wrong. You’re gonna get shown the door, old man,” he asserted.

“As I recall, you couldn’t even handle your own darkness,” Xehanort sneered. “How, then, will you triumph over mine?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

Terra worked his mouth into a smile, then lowered his gaze. Within his chest dwelled a warm light—the light of his relationships.

“Oh? So that’s how it is, is it? Someone else has set foot in your heart. Eraqus, you sly fox...”

“I’m not afraid of what the darkness holds now. Even if you do wrestle control of my heart from me—even if you cast me into the deepest, darkest abyss—you’ll never sway me from the one cause that pushes me to keep on fighting. Whatever the cost, I’m ready to pay it.”

“Brave words, to be sure. But I’m a patient man. We can take as much time as we need to settle this little property dispute. However, know this: You are just one of many roads that I might choose to take.

Trust me. I made certain of that.”

Xehanort’s golden eyes glimmered ominously.

Meanwhile, in darkness of another sort...

She didn’t know how far she had walked—or how much time had passed. Aqua simply followed the never-ending path.

She had no idea where this road at the bottom of the abyss led, either. Still, she had persevered, believing it would take her somewhere.

But her feet were so heavy. Her faith was giving out.

Beside her arose a monster, the likes of which she had never seen. It had a heart-shaped hole in its chest.

Aqua summoned her Keyblade straight away, but then several more of the creatures appeared around her.

She could probably take them in a fight—but she briefly wondered if it wouldn’t be better to just sink into the darkness.

If she did—she wouldn’t need to walk any farther.

At that moment, two lights arrived and streaked toward the monsters.

The lights vanquished the creatures one after the other, then soared off into the gloom. There was no mistaking what they were: Terra’s and Ven’s Keyblades.

You two...

A smile appeared on Aqua’s lips. Now that she thought about it, she had forgotten how to smile after falling into the realm of darkness.

Aqua pulled her Wayfinder from her pocket and looked at it.

When she closed her eyes, she imagined Ven’s smile, Terra’s firm nod, Master Eraqus’s warm eyes, Mickey, and the faces of the many others she had met on her journey.

I’m not alone—you’re with me.

If she kept moving forward, someday she would be able to see them all again.

Scanning what lay ahead, Aqua started off once more.

“Hey! Mister Master.”

Braig slung his arm around the shoulder of the silver-haired youth in white calling himself Xehanort. The young man looked back at Braig with a dubious expression.

“Oh c’mon, you don’t even know your pal? Please tell me the amnesia was just a sick joke. Boy, this is some cliché.”

Then Braig peered into Xehanort’s face. His single eye glinted gold

as he studied the youth intently.

“Hey, you’re not...Terra? Just gotta check. As if. Well, don’t sweat it. I got your back.” Braig patted Xehanort on the shoulder.

A boy stopped and stared at their backs. It was Ienzo. Holding his hand was Ansem the Wise, who came to a halt behind them as well and turned to look at Braig and Xehanort.

Both Ansem and Ienzo were holding sea-salt ice cream in their free hands.

I, too, have had everything taken away from me, banished to a hollow realm of nothingness.

What is Xehanort hoping to gain with my pilfered existence?

Will my people cease to smile?

If the light of hope has been extinguished, I shall henceforth walk with darkness as a friend.

Here, in the realm of nothingness to which I have been relegated.

The distant days spent in that beautiful paradise are an illusion to me now.

How long have I been here, banished to the realm of nothingness?

It is only by relying upon my anger and hatred that I have been able to retain my sense of self here where all existence is nullified.

It was around the time two heroes were finishing their second adventure to bring peace to the worlds.

The soft rush of the waves reached her ears.

She was on a deserted beach.

A hazy light hung in the distance—perhaps the setting sun, or perhaps the moon.

She had finally arrived at the edge of the darkness, and here she found a solitary figure in a black coat.

I wonder how long it’s been since I’ve seen another person...

Aqua spoke to the figure. “Who are you?”

“Why, hello. It’s not often I get visitors.”

The reply came in a deep, masculine voice.

“Please, call me Aqua. Why are you sitting here all alone in the realm of darkness? How did you end up here?”

She might have been a bit excited to meet someone else; Aqua clutched her chest to calm her racing heart as she peppered him with questions.

“Well...I can tell you this is my second time on these shores. But unfortunately, much like the first, I do not remember who I am or

whence I came. Everything was washed away in whatever currents carried me here.”

“That’s too bad...”

Aqua was a little disappointed. She’d hoped that maybe he would know a way to escape this realm, but it was nothing more than a fleeting dream.

She sat down on the sand a short distance away from the man and confessed, “I know I’ve been here a long time, wandering through the endless hours...unable to escape...” *I’m just a little...tired.* She put her arms around her knees.

“You wish to return to your own world?” the man asked quietly.

She gave a small nod, then firmly answered. “It’s my friends. I promised I’d be there for them.”

I want to return—I have to return to the real world, and keep my promise to Ven...

“Your friends?” the man murmured softly, then looked out over the waves and continued. “Somewhere in the scraps of memory I have left, you remind me of a boy I once knew. He is very much like you—true to his friends, and kind. This boy travels to many worlds and fights to keep the light safe.”

“Keep the light safe?” Aqua asked back. Why would the light need safeguarding? What state must the worlds be in? “I’ve been away too long. Did something happen out there? Are the worlds in danger?”

“Sad to say, they nearly fell to darkness more than once. But at every turn, that boy arrived with Keyblade in hand to save the day.”

Keyblade—it had been some time since Aqua heard that term as well. The worlds had been saved by a boy with a Keyblade.

And there weren’t many who could wield those.

Maybe...No, it couldn’t be...

“Wait a sec...Is his name Terra or Ven?” Aqua sat up.

“Neither of those, I’m afraid.”

“Should’ve known.”

Of course—Ven wouldn’t wake up that easily. Terra was probably somewhere out there, but he wasn’t a boy.

Aqua didn’t know what was happening in the worlds outside. She didn’t even know how much time had passed. It was all she could do to keep from succumbing to the solitude and despair. Each time she came close to giving up, their connection had touched her again.

And that had inspired hope in her, that this savior of the worlds could have been either of them.

“How long has it been since I met him? At least a year now, perhaps more...Back then my heart was clouded with vengeance. I did terrible things...both to him and his friends. I brought unhappiness to more lives than one.”

The man began recounting his misdeeds. The waves lapped at Aqua's feet.

"I felt something must be done. Was that why? A means of clearing my conscience? Or perhaps out of a sort of scholarly instinct. While the boy slept his long sleep, I hid the results of my research inside him, transplanting the data to where it might best serve a purpose. In fact, I would like to believe...maybe he can set things right. A boy like him who touches so many hearts—he could open the right door and save all those people whose lives I managed to ruin. So many are still waiting for their new beginning, their birth by sleep. Even me...and even you."

Aqua lifted her head and looked at the man. There was something she wanted to know.

"What's this boy's name?"

"His name...is...Sora."

The man slowly told her.

Tears welled up in Aqua's eyes the moment she heard the name.

"Hey, you two mind telling me your names?"

"I'm Sora—"

Everything was connected. It was all connected, even now.

"Sora." Aqua called his name.

Everyone was calling his name. Everyone he had met before across the worlds, the three in Twilight Town whom he had yet to befriend, the girl lost between the links of his memories—and Ven and Terra.

All were born from sleep, and moving toward wakefulness.

Where we wait for him...

The waves rushed softly onto the shore, and the sinking sun fell over the Destiny Islands. *Our home—and the home of the other one who left.*

"Sora." Riku called out to Sora, who sat alone on a papou tree. In Sora's hand was a letter from the king—from Mickey.

"Your mind's made up?"

"Yeah." Sora nodded.

"Sora." Kairi approached quietly, and Sora hopped down from the papou tree.

"Kairi, I..."

"I know."

Sora's and Kairi's gazes met, something Riku observed in silence.

"It's just...they really need me. I have to go. I am who I am..."

because of them.”

Everything connected to Sora was connected to the worlds.

“See you soon,” Kairi said.

She placed a Wayfinder in Sora’s hand.

Starting a new journey may not be so hard.

Or maybe it’s already begun.

The evening sun sank into the seas of the Destiny Islands.

Reconnect to KINGDOM HEARTS

Xemnas sat low in his seat, deep within the Castle That Never Was.
Before him lay a single suit of armor and a Keyblade.

“It has been far too long, friend.”

This was a place called the Chamber of Repose. Within the other castle, there was supposedly another chamber that he had yet to find.

Along with another friend.

They would be there—in Castle Oblivion.

They were in the Hall of the Cornerstone within Disney Castle. Sora, Donald, and Goofy—the three of them had been summoned here around the time they were facing Organization XIII in their adventures.

“You are heading into a very particular world. Once you discover why, the nature of it may tempt you to do something dark. You must resist that temptation at all costs.”

Sora recalled what Merlin had said when they had first come to this world and opened the door to Timeless River.

“Something screwy’s going on here...,” Donald said uneasily.

Minnie told them that the Hall of the Cornerstone was an important chamber where the Cornerstone of Light lay. The Cornerstone, which had once been sealed away by the magic of Maleficent, had now recovered its former gleam. But what greeted Sora and the others on the other side of the Cornerstone of Light when they made their return visit was a vortex of darkness leading to the Realm Between.

“Why would something like that be here...?”

Sora tilted his head. His heart was trembling somewhat. Maybe this was from another memory.

“Okay, let’s go!”

Sora stepped into the forbidden vortex and arrived in a wasteland he’d never seen before.

There was a powerful gust of wind—and then a lone man appeared beyond the cloud of dust. He was wearing armor, with a Keyblade in his hand. A deep voice emanated from the kneeling figure with his weapon thrust into the ground.

“Aqua...Ven...”

Those were probably names. Sora had never heard them before.

“A Keyblade...?”

At that word, Sora instinctively summoned his own Keyblade. Behind him, Donald and Goofy also prepared themselves.

The armored man continued. "Who are you? I know you. We've met before, way back when."

They had met before? Sora didn't remember that particular encounter. Yet something about all this bothered him.

"No, that wasn't you. You're not the one I chose."

His words didn't make any sense to Sora. Then the man slowly got to his feet.

"Where is he?"

Who?

Now standing, the man said a name Sora didn't expect. "Xe...ha...nort...Is that you? Xeha...nort...Xehanort!"

Did this guy know Xehanort? Sora didn't have any time to worry about that, though, as the man quickly closed the distance between them and attacked.

He was strong! Almost impossibly so.

Sora was instantly sent flying and hit the ground hard.

Wait...Have I...done this before...?

But this was no time for contemplation. The man dealt out blow after blow, left and right, driving Sora back.

Donald immediately cast a healing spell. Sora managed to regain his composure and struck the armored figure.

He was more powerful than anyone Sora had fought up that point. He couldn't afford to let his mind wander.

Sora mustered all the power he could, called on everything he had, and fought.

He didn't know how long they had been fighting—and then his opponent suddenly stopped.

The armored man regarded Sora, then said in a deep voice, "That's it. Your power. That's what I felt within you."

After that, the armor slowly fell inert and didn't move again.



Dwarf Woodlands
Something Strange Chapter 2-A





Castle of Dreams
Something Strange Chapter 2-C



Mysterious Tower
Something Strange Chapter 3: To the Future Chapter 8, 9, 12, 13



Disney Town
Best Friends Chapter 6-A





Olympus Coliseum
Best Friends Chapter 6-C



Neverland
Best Friends Chapter 7





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